

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## PILLARS OF SOCIETY

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 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,' '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. Corruption, in society and in the family, has never been more fascinatingly exposed.

### Story

Ibsen is an analyst of society and its ills, as well as of the individuals who make their flawed ways through those societies. In *The Pillars of Society*, he comes as far as he ever gets, toward analysis of society in economic terms—the kind of perception we find in his contemporary Karl Marx.

We enter the play through a ruthless business figure in a small Norwegian coastal town. Karsten Bernick has substantial investments in shipbuilding and shipping, and is currently backing a new and ambitious plan, for the construction of a railway, which will link his town to a fertile valley—and to its rich produce.

In the midst of these promising endeavors, Karsten's past returns to bite him; his wife's younger brother returns from America, to the same town he fled fifteen years earlier, under suspicion that he had run away with some of Bernick's investments. It had also been rumored that Toennesen, the younger brother, had been having an affair with an actress, and was leaving in an aura of scandal. The truth of the matter, in both cases, is that Karsten himself was having an affair with the actress, and that Toennesen was covering for him; there was at the time almost no money in Karsten's bank account, nothing to steal.

Toennesen has returned accompanied by his half-sister, Lona, who in the past was the lover of Karsten Bernick—whose cover is by the minute closer to being blown. (Karsten has meantime married for money, a local woman who is of use to him in his investments.)

The trigger to the explosive turn of the drama, is Toennesen, who falls in love with the daughter of the scandal-woman actress, earlier at the center of town's shock and disapprobation. Toennesen demands that Bernick should tell the girl the whole truth about her mother's scandal—that her lover was Karsten and not Toennesen. Bernick refuses, and Toennesen asserts that he will return to America to settle his affairs, then return to Norway to marry Dina, his love.

Karsten sees here his chance to get rid of Toennesen, and prepares one of his ships—which is in an unseaworthy state—for departure to America the next day. (Toennesen, and the whole crew, will be en route to almost certain death at sea.) The plan fails. Toennesen leaves with Dina on another ship, and in the end it is Karsten's own son, a stowaway on the death-ship, who heads out to almost certain death.

Bernick discovers the tragic failure of his plans, on the night when the city has lined up to honor his many achievements on behalf of the town. A tragic denouement seems in the offing, but Ibsen stages a sudden turnaround. The manager of Karsten's shipyard has an attack of conscience, and stops the ship heading to sea with Karsten's son, who is saved at the last minute. Bernick addresses the town to express his gratitude, tells them much of the hidden story of his life, and delights his wife by telling her he only married her for her money. She foresees a prosperous future for them, and says that the time has come for true marital happiness. As often, Ibsen winks at us ironically from a corner of his text, and suggests that to a limited extent he has been writing a comedy.

### Themes

**Dishonesty.** Karsten's ambitious projects, for developing a railroad in his town, are built on shaky foundations. His dishonesty, about the reasons for Toennesen's disappearance into America, leave him vulnerable to the truth, which Toennesen will eventually bring back home with him.

**Credulity.** At the end of the play, the townspeople accept Karsten's half-truths, about his relation to Toennesen, and pass over the past as though all they wanted was to return to the *status quo ante*.

### Characters

**Karsten** is an ambitious financier, with plans, for developing his town, which though built on lies will nevertheless bring growth to the town. Basically, a hard driven coward, he is nonetheless the leading force in his community, and they accept him.

**Toennesen** is a complex character who accepted a free life in America at the cost of backing up Karsten's shaky innocence back home. We are never sure why Toennesen has settled on this bargain—shady deals seem to shadow him—and we know he is ultimately happy to wield blackmail power over Karsten.

**The shipyard manager**, who initially complies with Karsten's request, to put *The Indian Girl* to sea in bad shape, is ultimately the one person of intact conscience in the play. It is he who calls the ship back to land before it gets launched.

### MAJOR CHARACTER

#### **Karsten Bernick** (closed)

**Character** Karsten Bernick is a well to do shipbuilder, and dominant businessman, in a smallish fjord city in Norway. He has projected plans for a new transportation means, a railroad, which will richly supplement his regional shipping business. As Bernick reaches the summit of his power a scandal from his past comes back to bite him—a return from America of his brother-in-law, Toennesen, who brings long hidden knowledge about the misdeeds of Bernick, which Toennesen had agreed to take the blame for, as he went off to the States. With this return, and the uncomfortable reappearance of an old lover, Bernick nearly founders, though at the end he pulls through, a wobbly 'pillar of society.'

**Parallels** *Pillars of Society* (1877) was written during the height of capital development in late 19th century America. This was the period of the 'robber barons,' or 'captains of industry,' whichever term your philosophy prefers, and has left us household names—like Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, J.P.Morgan, or John D. Rockefeller—as reminders of the mixture of good with evil that characterized this period in economic history. Ibsen may be an artist, before he is a social critic, yet his art took him to the center of the complex personality—Karsten Bernick—which

the Age of the Robber Barons was fostering throughout the western world, even in a Norwegian fjord community.

### Illustrative moments

**Moralist** Bernick, like many people with skeletons in their closets, is prone to moralize. Though with his own ‘scandalous’ background as a family man, Bernick is in a weak position to lecture, he urges the socialistically minded Krap to consider these words: ‘...the family is the kernel of society. A good home, honored and trusty friends, a little snug family circle, where no disturbing elements can cast their shadow...’ Knowing as we do, that Bernick has a precarious relation to his own family, and that he is about to risk innocent people’s lives on the high seas, we shudder at the man’s hypocrisy.

**Progressive** Bernick presents himself as progressive, when it comes to shipbuilding and sailing practice—although in fact he is a corner cutter, with an eye on the bottom line and little commitment to human lives. He berates Aune, the foreman of his shipyard: ‘when some concrete instance of progress presents itself—as now, in the case of our machines—you do not want to have anything to do with it.’ Bernick ignores Aune’s protests, that the workers will simply ‘have the bread taken out of their mouths by these machines.’ For Aune, progress will lie in the gradual education of the people to the nature and use of machines.

**Complex** Bernick is both a ‘modern capitalist’ interested in the growth of society, and a greedy man who is scrambling to cover up his past. He speaks very directly to his foreman, Aune, telling him that the new railway, with all it brings with it, will be a job-provider for the citizens of the region, like Aune himself. ‘The question, let me tell you, turns upon this—whether your home is to be supported, as you put it, or whether hundreds of new homes are to be prevented from existing—hundreds of homes that will never be built, never have a fire lighted on their hearth...’; and so on with Bernick’s cynical/benevolent modern capitalist argument.

**Realistic** Speaking with his sister-in-law, Bernick unfolds his ‘great man psychology’—which may be based on the true state of affairs. He explains to her that if he had not pushed through those power plays, which made possible the development of his railways project in town, there would have been no progress. Had he disclosed all his thinking and plans, to his fellow citizens, he would never have been able to accomplish what he did. ‘Everybody would have wanted to have a hand in the undertaking; the whole thing would have been divided up, mismanaged, and bungled.’

### Discussion questions

Is Ibsen a social critic or an artist? Is he interested in Bernick as a new captain-of- industry or as a portrait of a human being caught in crisis, and embedded in a fragile network of lives?

At the conclusion of the play, Bernick survives as a businessperson and leader, but just barely. What is the playwright telling us, about ‘the wages of sin’? Does sin pay?

At the end, Lona—Mrs. Bernick’s half-sister—notes that the ‘pillars of society’ are ‘the spirit of truth and the spirit of freedom.’ Does the play as a whole bear out that observation?