

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Characters in Ibsen

Oswald (emotional)

Character Oswald Alving is an *artist* (painter) who has been working and living in Paris, to which he has gone as a young man fleeing the dullness of bourgeois life in Norway. (Paris is in late 19th century Europe the mecca of the liberated artistic spirit.) When we first meet Oswald he has just returned to his home town in Norway, where his mother is spoiling him, pre emptively trying to quell his already apparent desire to return to the big city. But Oswald is the inheritor, from his father, of dubious morals and dubious genetics: the old man was a major skirt chaser, Oswald seems to have a case of venereal disease—with a potential for madness, much feared at the time—and Oswald is heading toward an incestuous marriage, as we learn from his conversation with his mother. The bevy of ills swirling around Oswald are largely the ghosts of his past, and will prove fatal.

Defensive Speaking with his mother, and with his former pastor, Oswald defends the free morality of his artistic community in Paris. He accuses the Norwegian bourgeois of hypocrisy, when they play immoral games with one another, while pretending that Oswald's Paris itself is the center of all vice. 'To think that the glorious freedom of the beautiful life over there should be so besmirched,' he says. We foresee that Oswald is going to be unable to remain at home, with the 'Philistines' he was brought up with. Oswald feels so strongly, about the moral issue here, that he has to take a walk in order to calm down.

Conflicted Enjoying one of his mom's home cooked meals, Oswald grows at first enthusiastic (a little bit ironically?): 'think what it means to me to have come home, to sit at my mother's own table, in my mother's own room...' A minute later, however, Oswald jumps up from the table, walks around the room smoking a cigar, and mutters irritatedly that he has nothing to do. 'I have no occupation.' We realize that Oswald cannot relax in his mother's house, and that in fact he is disturbed by an illness deeper than boredom. The next moment he is criticizing his mom for not being ecstatic to see him at home again.

/// Not much later, during the uncomfortable unfolding of the previous conversation, Oswald reveals his extraordinary fatigue, and tells his mother that he is ill. 'Mother, it's my mind that has broken down, gone to pieces. I shall never be able to work any more!' Oswald goes on to declare, to his mother, that he has never lived recklessly, made foolish choices, but that he has finally been driven—by the pain he has been suffering—to consult a doctor. He has learned that he is suffering from syphilis—a venereal disease much discussed at the time—and that he has, probably been infected with it from childhood—presumably as an inheritance from his dissolute father.

Erotics Oswald confesses to his mother that he has fallen in love with the daughter of the disreputable Engstrand, himself a dissolute handyman and employee of Oswald's family. 'Mother, when I saw this fine, splendid, handsome girl standing there in front of me...I realized that my salvation lay in her...' As it turns out, Regina, the girl, is Oswald's half-sister, which means that in marrying her, which he is about to do, Oswald is adding incest to the list of scandalous behaviors that pepper this text: the pastor is a dubiously liberal Christian; Oswald himself has taken drugs, committed incest, succumbed to syphilis. No wonder Oswald crowns these horrors by going mad.

Parallels French literature, with Paris as its spiritual capital, has long provided a home for free-spirited, anti-bourgeois, and—if you like—dissolute writers. Heavy drinking Francois Villon (1431-63) scoured the dark pavements of late mediaeval France, and came up with strong poetic emotions and desires, which broke all propriety. Four centuries later, a throng of French poets—take Gerard de Nerval (1808-1855), Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867, and Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891)—arose to shock a new kind of

bourgeoisie, post Industrial Revolution but materialistic and collective, with new kinds of antics, self-destructive behaviors, and daring trips into self and language.

Discussion questions

Is Oswald's love for Regina part of a search for health and wholeness, in the midst of his dissolute life?

What is Ibsen's point in *Ghosts*? Is he trying to *épater le bourgeois*, to shock the new middle class audience? Is he attempting to arouse pity and fear, as Aristotle claimed a tragedy should do?

What do you take the title term *Ghosts* to mean? The Norwegian word being translated here suggests 'those who come back' as a meaning for 'ghosts.' Does that help us with interpreting the title *Ghosts*?