

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

## Karsten Bernick (Pillars of Society) (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?