

GHOSTS

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 consciousnesses, 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,' 'Hedda Gabler,' '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: while specific issues, like incest, venereal disease, euthanasia and drug addiction attract particular attention in *Ghosts*.

Story

Ibsen is a relentless social critic, bringing, against the social corruption and pervasive hypocrisy, of his time, an angry sense of human failure. He lashes out at corrupt businessmen, flat footed middle class husbands, self-indulgent and self-destructive housewives, lecherous and deceptive old patriarchs, and, as in the play *Ghosts*(1882), big time philandering and its byproducts.

The main frame of the play involves Helen Alving, who is planning to dedicate an orphanage to the memory of her late husband. Although she would appear thus to be honoring Captain Alving's memory, the truth is—as she reveals to Pastor Manders-- that she had a rotten marriage with Captain Alving, thanks to his excessive philandering, and she has built the orphanage in order to deplete her husband's inheritance, and thus to keep money out of the hands of her son, Oswald. Pastor Manders had, it turns out, urged Helen to remain with her husband, which she had done, in order to protect her son from the nasty rumors that went with divorce, and to save herself from the scorn of the community.

In the course of the play Mrs. Alving discovers that her son, Oswald, whom she had sent away for sanity and security, has contracted syphilis, an at the time greatly feared—and reprobated--disease, which Oswald had inherited from his dad. She also learns that Oswald has fallen in love with Regina Engstrand, who is an illegitimate daughter of her husband, and thus that Oswald has fallen for his half-sister, a further scandal, along with the syphilis, for the narrow minded society that surrounds the family.

A dreadful dénouement awaits this whole state of affairs, which are, however, held in abeyance by a parallel set of events. They develop around a carpenter, Jacob Engstrand, who married Regina's mother when she was already pregnant with Regina; wherefore Jacob regards Regina as his own daughter. Jacob has recently completed building Mrs. Alving's orphanage, and decides to open a shelter for seafarers. He tries to persuade Regina to leave Mrs. Alving, and to help him run his hostel, but she refuses, and not much later—by coincidence—the orphanage burns down. Pastor Manders, who has persuaded Mrs. Alving not to insure the structure—that would show lack of trust in god—agrees to take the blame, by an admission that he had been careless in using candles. Pastor Manders, conscience-driven, agrees to support Jacob's hostel. Mrs. Alving's tragedy laden life is only further burdened, by the loss of her orphanage.

The sibling relationship between Oswald and Regina finally comes out, and Regina leaves town, no longer happy with her love. This loss is crushing for Oswald, who begs his mother to administer a dose of morphine which will put him out of his agony. The play ends with the mother's anguish over whether to comply with Oswald's life-ending request.

Both Mrs. Alving and her son are victims of social prejudice. Oswald is of course, in the spirit of the time, unable to confess his syphilis, and get help, while Mrs. Alving is excessively anxious to protect the young Oswald against any taint of scandal, in a society—like that of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* (1850)—craning its neck for a glimpse of unacceptable behavior. The orphanage, through which Mrs. Alving expects to expiate her involvement in bad behavior, burns to ashes as thoroughly as does her effort to protect her son.

Themes

Philandering. Although Captain Alving does not appear in the play, he dominates the play by the results of a philandering life style, which has itself dominated the behavior of the socially fearful Mrs. Alving.,

Hypocrisy. The cultural norms of the town, where *Ghosts* takes place, dictate silence over such questions as marital infidelity or venereal disease. Mrs. Alving herself pays the price for her inability to deal with either of these weaknesses.

Characters

Mrs. Alving is the central figure of the play, on whom all the sufferings—a dreadful marriage, a syphilitic son—come down. Fitting it is that the play should conclude on her torturing decision about offering a pain free death to her son.

Captain Alving, who is only virtually in the play, thanks to the consequences of his philandering, is in fact at the center. It is he who passed on a syphilitic inheritance to Oswald, and he who kept Mrs. Alving repressed, throughout his marriage to her.

Oswald is a pathetic character, a pawn moved by his parents' passions, and finally a loser in the one love, for Regina, which consumes him.

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.

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.

Illustrative moments

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.

III 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.

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*?