

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Characters in Ibsen

John Gabriel Borkman (introvert)

Character John Gabriel Borkman is a former bank manager, who was caught performing fraudulent practices with customers' money from his bank, was sentenced to several years in prison, and has subsequently—for eight years at the time of the play—been in virtual self-imposed house arrest. Borkman is by this time a deeply introverted dreamer, with a delusional faith in his power to mine and generate the wealth of the world. His own childhood, as a miner's son, has left a deep mark on his sense of the mineral richness of the world, and the potential power of human beings to exploit that richness. What was previously a visional slant to Borkman's professional energy has gradually become the material of paranoia, withdrawal, and neurosis.

Confidante In his upstairs isolation, through the years, Borkman has become friends with Frida, the teen age daughter of a government clerk who is the main adult companion of Borkman. (She performs on the piano for Borkman.) Borkman tells Frida that he has first heard such tones—the tones she is playing—down in the mines. When she asks him to explain, he tells her he was miner's son, and deep in the mines he could hear the metals singing such a tune as Frida's, as they declared their longing to be free from their deep imprisonment, free to 'come up into the light of day and serve mankind.'

Grandeur Borkman and Frida's father often engage in long discussions, in which Foldal tries to draw attention to his sadly unrecognized talents as a poet, while Borkman, with much more bravado, develops the theme of his own potential—still active, he insists—to be a globally powerful captain of industry. He envisions: 'All the mines I should have controlled! New veins innumerable! And the water-falls! And the quarries! And the trade routes and steamship lines all the wide world over!' He concedes that in fact, though, he sits in his room 'like a wounded eagle,' and 'look on while others pass me in the race.'

Explanation Borkman makes an effort to explain to his wife's twin sister, Ella, what drove him to the fraudulent bank move which in turn led to his downfall. He was simply taking a chance, borrowing against a very short term loan with which he could make a stunning quick yielding investment which would lead him to vast power. 'For the love of power is uncontrollable in me...So I struck the bargain...I had to.' We are not sure whether Borkman has come to terms with his megalomania, or is simply learning what to call it. Ibsen maintains great tension around such explanations as Borkman's.

Transition Even as he approaches his death, Borkman fantasizes that the power of nature is essentially under his control, and that it testifies to his greatness. Just before expiring he sits with his former lover, Ella, and watches the snowy winter mountains, surrounded as they are in blasts of icy wind. Borkman expostulates: 'That blast is the breath of life to me. That blast comes to me like a greeting from subject spirits! I seem to touch them, the prisoned millions...' Borkman harks back to his youth in the environment of the mines, and can only think of the earth as the source of precious, liberty-loving minerals, which long to serve mankind—or is it to serve his power lust?

Parallels Shame and disgrace come in many colors. A man like Borkman, caught in the act, in mid-career, knows that he will ever after be labeled a crook; a lifetime stain. Menelaus, home again with a naughty and gorgeous wife, who sparked a war, is just plain quietly embarrassed—what a fool I was!—and rightly so. Prince Vronsky in *Anna Karenina* (1873) transitions almost overnight from being an all conquering lover in the bed to a state of virtual rejection by his ultimately scandalized military peer group. In *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) Stephen Crane builds a complex shame-structure into the mindset of Henry Fielding, a young recruit to the Union forces in the Civil War. Secretly guilty of desertion, under enemy fire, Fielding keeps the shame to himself, anxiously, and by the end of his service, which he completes suitably, he has half-convinced himself that he was basically not a coward.

Discussion questions

Does Ibsen admire something about Borkman? Is Borkman a fascinating Lear type? Or is he a deranged loser?

Is Borkman the main character of this play? Or are the sisters or even the young boy they fight over central figures in the play? Is the play unified?

This play is Ibsen's penultimate. Is he growing aged and poetic here? Is Borkman the author's self-portrait?