



Ghosts

Study Guide by Course Hero



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👁 Book Basics

AUTHOR

Henrik Ibsen

FIRST PERFORMED

1882

GENRE

Drama

ABOUT THE TITLE

The title *Ghosts* refers to the people and memories of the past that haunt the main character in the play.

📍 In Context

Realism in the Arts

Henrik Ibsen's major plays are part of a 19th-century artistic movement called Realism that strove to represent real life faithfully. In novels such as those by Charles Dickens in the 1860s and 1870s, characters are drawn from the the middle and lower classes rather than the exalted ranks more familiar in classical literature. The physical environment of the stories is accurately presented, and the connection between a character's thoughts and behavior is explored. In visual arts the rise of photography reflected the desire to see the "real" picture rather than an artist's interpretation of a subject. Journalism became an endeavor dedicated to reporting facts and events objectively without the veil of an author's viewpoint. Thus, in his major plays, Ibsen focuses on ordinary people and their imperfections as he presents what he sees as an unvarnished view of society. His new kind of realistic drama and theater brought this artistic movement to 19th-century audiences.

The Shift to Realism in Theater

Although Ibsen's plays and theatrical productions might appear traditional and old-fashioned now, in the last half of the 19th century they were considered radical because of their realism. In the first half of the 19th century, European theaters staged productions that were anything but realistic. Melodramas with stereotypical characters and simple plots that ended happily dominated popular theater. Sweeping historical spectacles or tragedies with lofty heroes expressing exaggerated emotions passed as serious drama. Acting was formal and stylized, and sets consisted of painted backdrops.

The formulaic "well-made plays" of French playwright Eugene

Scribe were also a staple of European theater. Scribe's comedies and dramas were carefully structured. The cause-and-effect plots built to a suspenseful climax when secrets were revealed at the end. These theatrical traditions did little to reflect the experiences and lives of ordinary people.

Although Ibsen borrowed from Scribe's drama, his plays created something new for the time. Ibsen boldly tackled social issues, showing the corruption and sadness often found below the surface in the midst of seemingly happy, prosperous families. Characters were ordinary people with real problems. The stage became a realistic room filled with furniture, knickknacks, windows, and doors. The performances in Ibsen's plays were equally realistic. Actors whispered, gasped, laughed, and shrieked to reflect the characters' emotions. Ibsen's realism showed middle-class characters and sets that looked much like the homes of the middle-class audience.

Psychology and the Stage

Ibsen was writing his major plays as a new form of science emerged. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, pioneered the study of the mind. Freud's focus on how past experience shapes behavior in his patients parallels Ibsen's interest in more fully realized characters in his plays. Earlier dramatic genres (such as melodrama) leaned heavily on contrived action to move the plot. Characters were generally stereotypes—the damsel in distress, the villain—with little depth of personality and little meaningful personal history. While Freud's work probed an individual's past for clues to explain present actions and illness, Ibsen likewise emphasized personal history, which is especially central to character and plot development in *Ghosts*. Like Freud's later patients, Ibsen's characters are products of events that occurred long before the plays begin.

Before and After *Ghosts*

Ghosts (1881) and the plays written just before and after it established Ibsen as a social critic. In *A Doll's House* (1879), a young wife and mother searches for equality in her marriage and in society. Ibsen achieved global fame with the play, which challenged society's position on women's rights. The play's protagonist, Nora Helmer, leaves her husband and children to search for a life as an independent woman. Nora's actions led

some to celebrate Ibsen's progressive thinking and others to severely criticize him for creating such an immoral character for the time. In *Nora*, Ibsen chose to push past a more traditional happy ending to examine real problems faced by women in society.

The themes and reception of *A Doll's House* in a sense laid the groundwork for the story presented in *Ghosts*. To combat the criticism of Nora's behavior in *A Doll's House*, Ibsen showed what could have happened had she stayed in her stifling marriage. In *Ghosts* Mrs. Alving chooses to follow society's rules at the expense of her own well-being. Ibsen shows how the results of such a choice are devastating. Mrs. Alving endures a faithless husband and the effects of that choice are a son dying of supposed inherited syphilis, a potential case of incest, and the dilemma of euthanasia. People were outraged. Newspapers who had hailed Ibsen as a liberal thinker in *A Doll's House* abandoned him after *Ghosts*. The play's first performance took place in Chicago in 1882 because no Norwegian or European theater would produce it.

Afterward, although Ibsen had the idea for *Enemy of the People* (1882) as he was writing *Ghosts*, the later play, in large part, reflects Ibsen's anger over the popular and critical response to his "scandalous" play. In *Enemy of the People* Dr. Stockmann tries to expose the town's contaminated water supply but is eventually rejected by the townspeople. Likewise, Ibsen had attempted to expose the toxicity of gender relations in his previous two plays but was rejected by popular and critical opinion. Dr. Stockmann is heard, then ignored. Ibsen was heard, then condemned. In a turn of situational irony, *Enemy of the People* was well received, even though its message is critical of a public that does not want change.

As a whole, people were often dismayed and angered, or at least confused, by Ibsen's plays. Perhaps the struggles of the characters on stage hit too close to home. Perhaps bringing difficult social issues into the light and onto the stage disturbed people as they saw themselves reflected in Ibsen's plots.

Author Biography

Henrik Ibsen was born March 20, 1828, to a wealthy family in the small Norwegian coastal town of Skien. When Ibsen was seven, his father declared bankruptcy, and although the family's circumstances had changed, Ibsen still enjoyed a comfortable life. The well-to-do bourgeois class, which formed

the background of Ibsen's youth, would provide the backdrop for many of his plays.

Ibsen left home when he was 15. He worked as an apothecary's assistant while he prepared for a career in medicine. When he was 20, he managed to find enough time to write his first, although unsuccessful, play, *Catiline*. However, he failed his university entrance exam, and this defeat sent him wholly toward a career in theater. At 23 he was hired as a stage manager and director at a theater in Bergen where he would write one new play each year until 1857. During this period Ibsen turned to the ancient myths of the Scandinavian sagas for his subject matter.

From 1857 to 1862 Ibsen was artistic director at the Norwegian Theatre, but when the theater went bankrupt, he eventually moved to Italy. Ibsen would not return to Norway for 27 years. Thus, Norway's most influential dramatist wrote his most important plays living far from his homeland. Two poetic dramas, *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, established Ibsen as a serious playwright, but his next three plays, *A Doll's House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), and *An Enemy of the People* (1882) took the dramatic world by storm.

The critical and popular reaction to *A Doll's House*, with its themes of women's rights and equality between the sexes, was both celebratory and shocking. This response, however, appeared muted compared to the uproar caused by Ibsen's next play, *Ghosts*. The topics of marital infidelity, venereal disease, incest, prostitution, and euthanasia presented in *Ghosts* generated a horrified outcry when the play was published. Booksellers did not want the play on their shelves, and many copies were returned to the publisher. No Norwegian or European theater would stage the play, so its first performance was in the United States.

Regarded as a social critic, Ibsen was willing to expose and explore some of the uglier issues in public and private life beneath the polite surfaces. He revolutionized the theater of his day with his brand of realistic drama. In the nine plays Ibsen wrote after *Ghosts*, he explored social issues, such as the conflict between individual and community, and the psychological development of his characters, often through mature characters who live with the consequences of choices made during their younger years.

Ibsen finally returned to Norway in 1891 and wrote his last four plays (*The Master Builder*, *Little Eyolf*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, and *When We Dead Awaken*). There were large celebrations on

his 70th birthday in 1898, but a series of strokes two years later ended his writing career. Ibsen died on May 23, 1906, and his funeral was a national event.

Characters

Mrs. Helene Alving

Mrs. Helene Alving is a smart, capable woman who successfully manages her estate and her husband's legacy. She has built an orphanage to honor his memory, but her public show of devotion is insincere. She presents a picture of a happy marriage and respectable husband to hide Captain Alving's affairs and profligate lifestyle. Although she despised her husband's behavior and its consequences, she accepted that it was her duty to stay with him. The love of her life is her son, whom she tried to shield from his father's past. Her carefully cultivated facade eventually crumbles, as she reveals the truth about her past to her family and friends.

Osvald Alving

Osvald is Mrs. Helene Alving's only child. He was sent away to Europe when he was seven, because his mother thought Captain Alving's behavior set a bad example for the boy. Osvald became an artist and embraced the more open and progressive society of Paris. He returns home for the opening of the orphanage, still believing his father was an admirable man. However, his illusions about his father are destroyed when he hears the truth about him. He then thinks he understands how he has inherited syphilis, the disease that has already begun to kill him.

Pastor Manders

Pastor Manders was a childhood friend of Captain Alving and is a trusted adviser to Mrs. Helene Alving. He was also Mrs. Alving's first love. He is the person Mrs. Alving turns to for support in the early days of her marriage, but he turns her away and sends her back to a husband she does not love. Pastor Manders upholds traditional views of morality and duty without always knowing much about the situations he judges

so harshly. He is mostly concerned with avoiding scandal and keeping up appearances, even if it makes him a hypocrite.

Engstrand

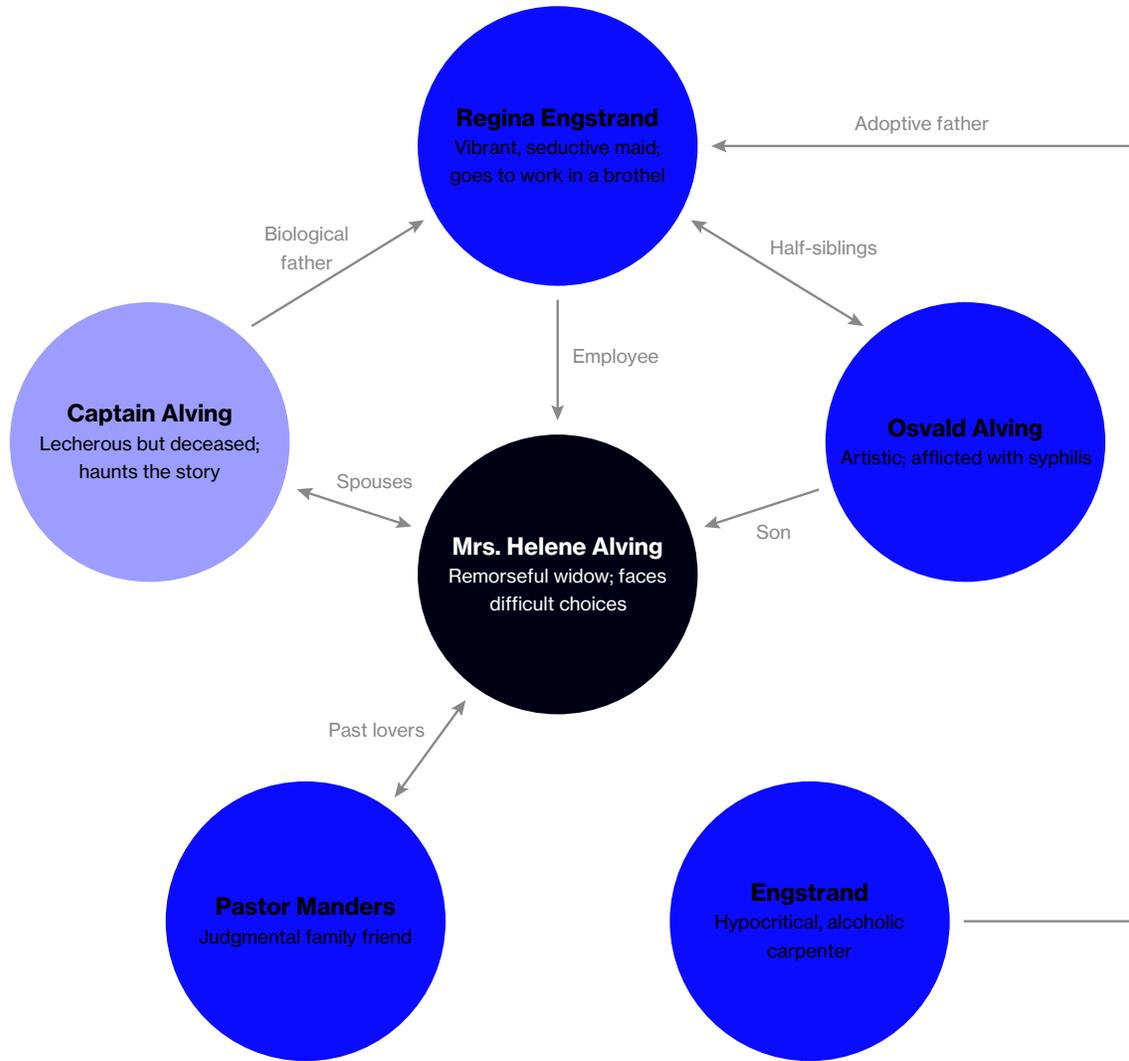
Engstrand is a long-time acquaintance of the Alvings, who for self-serving purposes agreed to adopt Regina, Captain Alving's illegitimate daughter. He has never loved her as a father, however, and tries to convince her to take up employment in his seaman's hotel (where she would be a prostitute).

Engstrand serves as a foil for Pastor Manders, who has equally heinous motives but conceals them behind propriety.

Regina Engstrand

During the play, Regina learns that she is not Engstrand's daughter at all, but the illegitimate daughter of Captain Alving, whose widow she now serves as a maid; with this revelation, she learns that she is half-sister to Oswald, with whom she has begun to fall in love. Barred now from happiness with him, she seemingly has no option but to seek her way as a prostitute in the city.

Character Map



- Main Character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
Mrs. Helene Alving	Mrs. Helene Alving is a widow and head of a prosperous estate in Norway.
Osvald Alving	Osvald Alving, an artist, is Mrs. Alving's son.
Pastor Manders	Pastor Manders is a longtime family friend who helps Mrs. Helene Alving manage some of her business endeavors.
Engstrand	Jacob Engstrand is a carpenter who sometimes works for Mrs. Helene Alving.
Regina Engstrand	Regina Engstrand, Mrs. Helene Alving's vibrant maid, is known as the daughter of Engstrand.
Captain Alving	Captain Alving is Mrs. Helene Alving's dead husband. (He does not appear in the play.)
Joanna	Joanna is Regina Engstrand's mother and former maid to the Alvings. (She does not appear in the play.)

Plot Summary

Ghosts begins on a rainy day in a remote part of Norway on the estate of Mrs. Helene Alving, a widow of some fortune. The household is preparing for the opening of an orphanage built by Mrs. Alving in honor of her late husband, Captain Alving. Regina Engstrand, Mrs. Alving's maid, has a strained conversation with her father, Engstrand, a carpenter with negative attitudes and a malformed leg that causes him to hobble. They argue about her future and her role in his shady business plan for a sailors' hotel that will be nothing more than a house of prostitution.

As Regina shoos her father away, Pastor Manders arrives. A longtime family friend, Pastor Manders handles business

transactions related to the orphanage, and he has come to review final details with Mrs. Alving. But before he and Mrs. Alving conduct their meeting, he chastises her for reading books he sees that he considers inappropriate. She informs him that her reading mirrors what she has often thought and what most people believe. But, she says, "most people don't like to face these things, or what they imply." Pastor Manders considers this position of hers on free love and progressive behavior immoral.

Their conversation widens to include Mrs. Alving's son, Osvald Alving, who is ill and has now returned from Europe to attend the opening of the orphanage. Osvald is an artist, and Pastor Manders is again scandalized when Osvald describes his friends, whose lifestyle Pastor Manders rejects: "But you're talking about illicit relations! About plain, irresponsible free love!" the pastor exclaims. Osvald politely tells the pastor he disagrees with his moral outrage, because his friends are good people.

Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders continue the conversation alone. She reveals details about her relationship with her late husband that come as a surprise to her friend. Captain Alving's affairs and drinking and Mrs. Alving's disgust with her marriage shock Pastor Manders. Osvald is overheard making inappropriate advances toward Regina, and Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving fear the past is repeating itself from father to son.

As the story unfolds, Mrs. Alving tells Pastor Manders more about her marriage and the lies she has constructed to preserve Captain Alving's reputation. Among other sordid details, she reveals Regina is Captain Alving's illegitimate child. Pastor Manders now better understands Mrs. Alving's desire to leave her husband early in her marriage, although based on Pastor Manders's faith, he thinks it was Mrs. Alving's duty to stay with her husband regardless of his behavior.

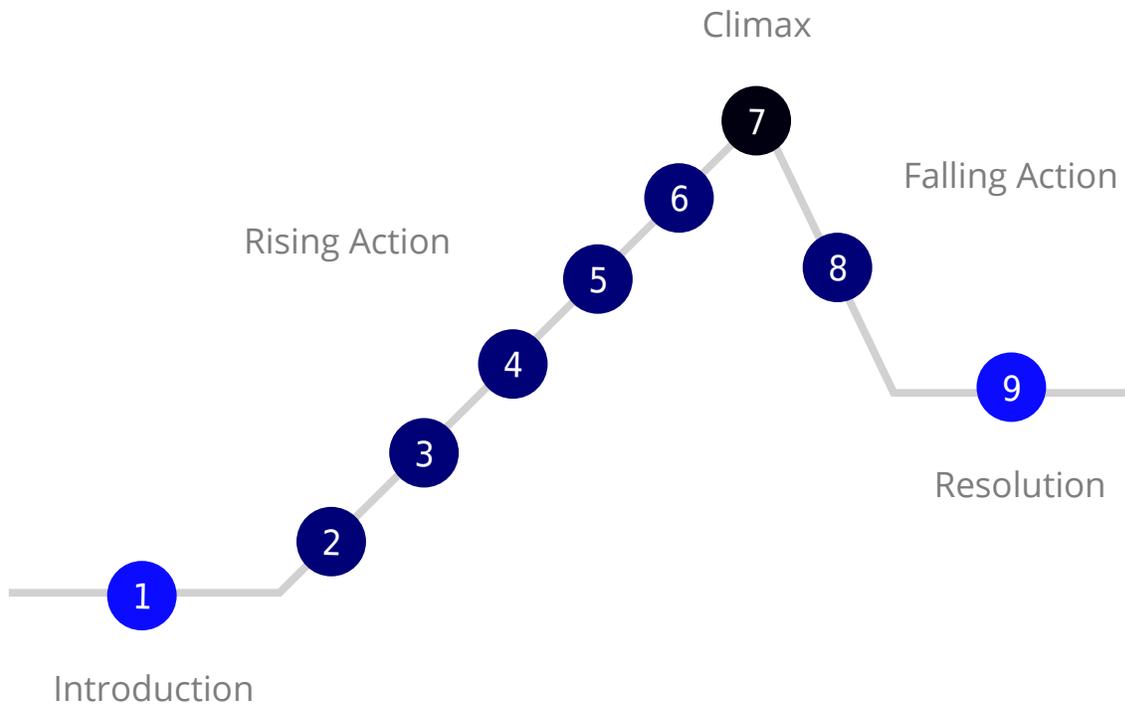
As the evening wears on, Osvald and Mrs. Alving discuss the potential causes for his ill health. He explains that underlying unhappiness in his family and community causes his inability to work: "Here," Osvald says to his mother, "everyone's brought up to believe that work is a curse and a punishment, and that life is a miserable thing that we're best off to be out of as soon as possible." Mrs. Alving agrees and begins to see that her lifelong devotion to "duty" has killed the joy in her own life.

As an antidote to his emotional and physical decline, Osvald makes it clear he intends to marry the vivacious Regina,

perhaps to reclaim his "joy of life." But just as Oswald reveals his intention, the family sees with horror that the orphanage is on fire. The next morning everyone's plans have shifted drastically. Mrs. Alving cares little for the destroyed orphanage, a sham monument to a husband she despised. Engstrand blackmails Pastor Manders into funding his disreputable hotel. Mrs. Alving reveals that Oswald and Regina are half-siblings, thereby ending Oswald's path to happiness with her and Regina's respectable future. Regina leaves, her plans now uncertain.

The disintegration of the Alving family continues as Oswald's health worsens. Mrs. Alving and Oswald are left alone with each other. Oswald finally clarifies the source of his illness to his mother: syphilis, which he inherited from his father, according to the play. As Mrs. Alving processes this devastating news, Oswald asks her to help him end his life when he becomes debilitated. At first she refuses in horror, but as Oswald slumps into a vegetative state, the unthinkable choice of whether to kill her son is thrust upon her.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. Preparations are made to open the Captain Alving Orphanage.

Rising Action

- 2.** Oswald Alving returns home.
- 3.** Mrs. Helene Alving tells marital secrets to Pastor Manders.
- 4.** Oswald tells his mother he is very ill.
- 5.** Oswald pursues Regina Engstrand.
- 6.** The orphanage is destroyed by fire.

Climax

7. Mrs. Alving tells Regina and Oswald they are siblings.

Falling Action

8. Oswald reveals the progression of his disease.

Resolution

9. Oswald is debilitated; Mrs. Alving faces a brutal choice.

Timeline of Events

Before dinner

Osvald Alving, home for the opening of the orphanage, expresses views that shock Pastor Manders.

Walking into dinner

Mrs. Alving reveals to Pastor Manders Regina Engstrand is Captain Alving's illegitimate daughter.

Later after dinner

Osvald declares he will marry Regina.

Just before dawn

Mrs. Alving tells Osvald his father was really a degenerate man.

As the sun comes up

Osvald is incapacitated by his disease; Mrs. Alving must decide whether to end his life.

One evening before dinner

The household prepares to open the orphanage Mrs. Helene Alving built in memory of her husband.

In private before dinner

Mrs. Alving tells Pastor Manders that Captain Alving was an unfaithful husband.

After dinner

Engstrand admits he is not Regina's father.

Later in the evening

The orphanage burns to the ground; Engstrand blackmails Pastor Manders by taking blame for the fire.

Just before dawn

Mrs. Alving explains to Osvald and Regina that they are half-siblings; Regina leaves.

Act Summaries

Ghosts has one setting: all action takes place in a garden room in the home of Mrs. Helene Alving's estate in the late 19th century. Although there are no individual scenes in the play, this study guide has broken each of the three acts into sections based on character groupings for the purpose of analysis.

Act 1 (Regina and Engstrand)

Summary

Mrs. Helene Alving's household is getting ready for the opening of the orphanage. Regina Engstrand has an unwelcome talk with Engstrand that shows they clearly have different views of Regina's future. She says she wants to see the world and improve her social position. Engstrand has no qualms with his daughter working at the "hotel for seamen" he wants to establish. He makes sly innuendos about Regina's parentage before she forces him to leave, worried that he will wake Oswald Alving. Engstrand goes out one door as Pastor Manders arrives through another.

Analysis

Henrik Ibsen sets the stage with people and conversations that hint at topics to come. Conflict, secrets, and hypocrisy infuse even this brief conversation between Regina and Engstrand, whose physical deformity is quickly seen to mirror his moral depravity. Regina scorns her "father" and he curses her, showing little regard for her outside of how he can use her for his own ends. He seems to revel in his duplicity, mocking the idea of being a loving father as he looks for the next strategy he can pull on Pastor Manders. Regina Engstrand sees her father for what he is: a hypocrite and a drunkard.

Regina tries to distance herself from her past as it is represented by her father. Her use of French and her contempt for Engstrand's suggestion that she work in the brothel he wants to build reveal she has better plans for herself. There is the hint that her plans involve Oswald Alving. Her manner and ideals irritate Engstrand, in part because they

remind him of her late mother, whom he also derides for attempting to "make herself so refined." Ibsen uses the gloomy rain outside and the ugliness between Regina and Engstrand inside to create a grim tone.

Act 1 (Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving)

Summary

Pastor Manders comes to see Mrs. Helene Alving about business concerning the orphanage, but first he comments on the books she is reading. Mrs. Alving defends her choice of books and the progressive message they contain. Although Pastor Manders has not read the books, he harshly judges their contents as well as Mrs. Alving's opinions. When talk turns to business, Pastor Manders questions whether Mrs. Alving needs to insure the orphanage. He tells her that some in the community might see insurance as a lack of faith in God's protection. He recommends against insuring the building, and Mrs. Alving eventually agrees, although she sees this as a great risk. Their conversation winds down with Pastor Manders expressing support for Engstrand.

Analysis

Pastor Manders is at his condescending worst as he condemns not only Mrs. Helene Alving's opinions about morality, but also her past conduct as a wife and mother. After expressing his disapproval in a sanctimonious tone, they turn to business. The key components of his personality are presented in this scene. He is judgmental. He endorses conventional concepts of morality. He is gullible. Although Pastor Manders presents a grave attitude about Mrs. Alving's behavior and his reputation, he is almost cartoonish in his belief in Engstrand's good intentions. Most noticeably, however, he is acutely concerned with people's opinions of himself. He is worried that insuring the orphanage will cast doubt on his religious devotion and put him in a "painful" position with the "best circles in town."

Mrs. Alving, as she has done in the past, goes along with his advice against her better judgment. Their discussion about the

insurance shows that she has sound ideas but lacks the courage to act on them. Pastor Manders reveals his ability to construct a position that looks like it is about the common good but is really about protecting himself. The decision not to insure the orphanage also introduces a sense of foreshadowing. Henrik Ibsen intends that such a specific detail will be revisited in the play he constructs toward a climax.

Act 1 (Osvald Arrives)

Summary

Osvald Alving finally appears, and Mrs. Helene Alving beams as Pastor Manders welcomes him home. They share memories of Captain Alving, and Osvald reveals that when he was a child, his father gave him a pipe to smoke, which made him ill. The conversation then turns to free love. Pastor Manders disapproves of the artists' lifestyle Osvald has been exposed to in Europe. Osvald defends his friends in Paris, many of whom have happy homes, even though they live together without marrying. Pastor Manders is scandalized by this description of "illicit relations." Osvald explains that he has seen many so-called respectable men behave much worse than his friends who keep "unconventional homes." In a sense, because the conflict cannot be resolved in the traditional society, Pastor Manders and Osvald agree to disagree.

Analysis

The debate over conventional morality versus "free love" that Henrik Ibsen introduced earlier in the act continues in this scene. Ibsen provides a glimpse into the character of Captain Alving through Osvald Alving's story about the pipe. Captain Alving's insistence that his young son smoke until he vomits reveals poor judgment at best, and at worst, manifest cruelty. Yet Osvald ("he got so much accomplished—so much that was good and useful") and Pastor Manders ("it's a strong and worthy name you've inherited") still praise Captain Alving, in ignorance of the truth of his life still hidden.

Pastor Manders again focuses on his strict rules of morality. Like Mrs. Helene Alving's books, Osvald's life in Paris is the target of his criticism. To Osvald his friends are decent people. To Pastor Manders they are, by definition, indecent, although

he does not know them. Ibsen uses Osvald's response, that it is the "exemplary husbands and fathers" who behave the worst, to critique his own society. This short exchange is significant because Osvald shrewdly and fearlessly observes that respectability is not always what it seems.

Act 1 (Mrs. Alving's Secrets)

Summary

Osvald Alving leaves to take a walk, and Pastor Manders launches another round of criticism at Mrs. Helene Alving, condemning her as a bad wife and mother. Mrs. Alving listens, and then it is her turn. She tells Pastor Manders dark secrets about her marriage, explaining that Captain Alving lived a debauched life until he died. Pastor Manders is shocked. He is still reeling from this news when she tells him that Regina Engstrand is the illegitimate child of her husband and her maid. Just as Mrs. Alving thinks she is putting the past behind her by telling the truth, Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders hear Osvald making advances toward Regina.

Analysis

This scene is key to the play's action. A series of important revelations begins here with two bombshells, the truth about Captain Alving's behavior and Regina Engstrand's illegitimacy.

Pastor Manders speaks first and in his ignorance presents a scathing assessment of Mrs. Helene Alving's character. He calls her "undisciplined" and "lawless," a selfish woman who acts "carelessly and irresponsibly." He condemns her for wanting to leave her marriage as a newlywed; he upbraids her for coming to him for support; he downplays her young love for him and his feelings for her; he calls her a bad mother. When Mrs. Alving wanted to leave her husband early in her marriage, Pastor Manders "bent her will to duty and obedience." He takes pride in the fact that he convinced her to return to a husband and marriage she abhorred. She, in turn, has come to regret her devotion to duty and the lies she has told to protect her husband's reputation as well as her own.

Pastor Manders's initial indictment of Mrs. Alving rings hollow after she reveals the depths of her husband's depravity and the struggle of living with him. Her greatest sacrifice was

sending Oswald Alving away as a child to protect him from the "poisoned" atmosphere of their home. Mrs. Alving thus becomes a sympathetic character, and Henrik Ibsen shows she has great reserves of strength.

In this exchange with Pastor Manders, Mrs. Alving takes her first steps toward living a truthful life. She is eager to open the orphanage, because then "it will really seem as if the dad had never lived in this house." But before her life can be transformed, the ghosts of her husband and maid return as Oswald pursues Regina.

Act 2 (After Dinner)

Summary

Now that dinner is over, Pastor Manders and Mrs. Helene Alving return to their conversation about Regina Engstrand. Mrs. Alving explains how her husband's affair with her maid, Joanna, resulted in the illegitimate child. To ingratiate himself to the family and claim the hush money given to Joanna, Engstrand pretended he was the father and married Joanna.

Mrs. Alving compares her own marriage for money to Engstrand's marriage to Joanna. Mrs. Alving agrees with Pastor Manders that there can be no romance between Oswald Alving and Regina, even though she is almost tempted to give her blessing to make her son happy.

Analysis

This conversation lays out the core of Henrik Ibsen's message and clarifies the title of the play. As Pastor Manders and Mrs. Helene Alving discuss Regina Engstrand, Mrs. Alving explains the ghosts that haunt her. Seeing Oswald Alving and Regina most obviously recalls the ghosts of her husband and Joanna. But she goes beyond this connection. She calls outdated beliefs, "old dead doctrines and opinions," ghosts that haunt individuals and perhaps the entire country. These ghosts warp people's behavior, which can lead to the very tangle that has snared Oswald and Regina. Ibsen breaks open the past by tracing the choices of Mrs. Alving and her husband in a house built on fear and social convention.

Mrs. Alving also offers a stinging rebuke to Pastor Manders for

his devotion to traditional principles of behavior. "When you made me give in to what you called duty," she says, "when you praised as right and proper what I rebelled against heart and soul as something loathsome," that's when she began to question his teachings. She buried her personal integrity to follow what society prescribed as her duty. The wreck of a family created by that choice is Ibsen's indictment of her path and those who set her on it.

Act 2 (Engstrand Tells All)

Summary

Engstrand comes to tell Mrs. Helene Alving that he has finished work on the orphanage. While he is there, Pastor Manders asks him about his relationship to Regina Engstrand. Once informed that Mrs. Alving knows the truth, Engstrand admits that he is not Regina's father. At first Pastor Manders judges him harshly for keeping this secret, but Engstrand tells Pastor Manders he was silent to avoid appearing prideful. Pastor Manders has a change of heart and ends up asking for Engstrand's forgiveness. The two of them depart to hold a prayer meeting at the orphanage.

Analysis

This exchange highlights consistent negative character traits in Pastor Manders and Engstrand. At first Pastor Manders judges others too quickly. Feeling smug because Engstrand admitted the truth about Regina Engstrand, Pastor Manders cuts ties with him because he finds Engstrand's conduct corrupt.

Then, however, Engstrand's hypocrisy is on full display. He knows that all Pastor Manders needs is the appearance of propriety. Pastor Manders is willing to believe anything he hears if it sounds like conventional doctrine. So, Engstrand paints himself as Joanna's self-sacrificing savior. Engstrand claims he did not want to look like he was seeking credit for helping her, so he kept quiet and made a home "like the gospel says."

Engstrand is so convincing that Pastor Manders soon asks forgiveness of him. Henrik Ibsen shows how easy it is to play Pastor Manders—and those like him—for a fool, just by

presenting false piety. This give-and-take relationship between Pastor Manders and Engstrand will deepen later in the play.

Act 2 (Osvald, Regina, and the Fire)

Summary

In this section Osvald Alving begins to explain his illness to his mother. He says that he has headaches and fatigue because his life in Paris overwhelms him. He is distraught that he has brought his weakened state upon himself. Although his doctor said his illness comes from the "sins of the father," Osvald refutes this diagnosis. He still believes in his father's respectability. Osvald becomes more agitated and begins to imply that he is sicker than he has let on. Mrs. Helene Alving begins to panic about her son's health.

Mrs. Alving summons Regina Engstrand to bring wine for Osvald, who wants to drown his thoughts and warm himself against the chill. Osvald confesses to his mother that he intends to marry Regina. He declares his intentions to Regina, who is willing but confused. Mrs. Alving is horrified, but before she can explain to Osvald and Regina why they cannot be together, they all realize the orphanage is suddenly on fire.

Analysis

In the last section of Act 2, the family heads toward a final crisis. Osvald Alving's health moves to the foreground, and the action begins to move more quickly. Henrik Ibsen has Osvald articulate many core ideas in the play: Osvald raises the issue of not being able to escape the past. Although he attempts to deny it, Osvald sees that the sins of the father do haunt the son. Osvald also explains the joy that has infused his life in Paris. The joy of life depends on the ability of individuals to choose their own futures. Osvald sees that his hometown society and even his family are unable to support such a belief. "The joy of life, Mother," he says, "I never feel it here."

Ibsen also foregrounds the sun as a symbol in this scene. Remarking repeatedly on the rainy, gloomy weather, Osvald observes that he never sees the sun when he is home in Norway. The sun represents the warm weather of mainland

Europe, a place where the joy of life thrives. Osvald equates the sun with the ability to work and personal happiness.

In many ways Osvald is Ibsen's mouthpiece. As Ibsen broke with convention in the topics and staging of his plays, so Osvald lives outside the conventions of his conservative, often hypocritical, society. Ibsen suggests that denying the joy of life produces tragic consequences. Osvald and Regina Engstrand's declaration of their devotion to each other is punctured by the orphanage fire, which will change all.

Act 3 (Engstrand Takes the Blame)

Summary

The act opens with Mrs. Helene Alving, Regina Engstrand, Pastor Manders, and Engstrand trying to deal with the reality that the orphanage is now a total loss. Pastor Manders is worried that the public will direct "vicious attacks and innuendos" at him because of his association with the Alvings. Mrs. Alving, on the other hand, sees it as nothing more than a business loss. Pastor Manders turns his attention to salvaging some value from the land because the building was not insured.

Engstrand and Pastor Manders discuss the cause of the fire. Engstrand sets Pastor Manders up as the one who left a candle burning at their prayer meeting. Pastor Manders has no recollection of this but accepts Engstrand's version of what happened. Engstrand offers to take the blame for the fire if Pastor Manders funds his seaman's hotel. Pastor Manders willingly submits to the blackmail to avoid any hint of scandal.

Analysis

The destruction of the orphanage, a monument to corruption and lies, is the backdrop to this scene. Built to honor a dishonest view of Captain Alving, the orphanage stands for the society's willingness, even need, to accept appearance over reality. Henrik Ibsen uses fire to represent the inability of society to ultimately sustain such hypocrisy.

In this scene key character traits are solidified in response to

the disaster. Pastor Manders reveals once and for all that he is concerned about his reputation above all else. He frets about what the town might think of him, given his close ties to the Alving family. He is so self-absorbed that he is willing to let Engstrand take the blame rather than risk personal scandal. Pastor Manders will trade the orphanage for Engstrand's "seaman's hotel," having convinced himself of Engstrand's worth. Pastor Manders and Engstrand leave together, bound to each other in their hypocrisy.

Mrs. Helene Alving's response to the fire underscores her desire to live truthfully. She admits that the "orphanage was never made for anyone's benefit." She is glad it is gone, because she desperately wants to put the past behind her. As the flames die away, she turns all of her attention on making a future with her son.

Act 3 (Osvald and Regina)

Summary

Osvald Alving attempts to discuss his future with Regina Engstrand, but Mrs. Helene Alving intervenes. She explains that Osvald's earlier reflections on the joy of life have helped her better understand herself. She tells him that his father also felt the joy of life but had no outlet in which to express it. Mrs. Alving finally tells Osvald and Regina that they are half-siblings. Osvald and Regina are shocked. Osvald tries to convince Regina to stay, but she refuses. As she leaves, she reproaches Mrs. Alving for not raising her as a gentleman's daughter, which would have given her some social standing. Instead, Regina taunts Mrs. Alving with the notion that now her best option in the world can only be Engstrand's brothel for sailors.

Analysis

The play reaches its climax in this scene with Mrs. Helene Alving's revelation to Osvald Alving and Regina Engstrand. Before the news is out, Osvald's comment that "everything will burn" foreshadows that things will not end well. He persists in searching for someone who will help him "when the time comes," and he speaks desperately of his "fear." Mrs. Alving thinks his increasingly fragile state comes from his self-reproach. She knows the truth will free him from his guilt but

will destroy his chance for happiness with Regina.

Henrik Ibsen at last brings Mrs. Alving's, Captain Alving's, and Osvald's paths together. She explains that Osvald's insight into the joy of life provided a new lens through which she viewed her husband's behavior, as well as her own. Early in her marriage, she became a representative of the repressed society that privileges obligation to duty over duty to self. Her claim to Osvald that Captain Alving became a ravaged man because he had no outlet for his fierce vitality is part of Ibsen's indictment of society. She now understands that Captain Alving struggled to live in a "mediocre town that had no joys to offer." Mrs. Alving now, in contrast, is enlightened, but it is too late for these characters.

Act 3 is filled with leave-taking, and Regina is the next to go. She is hardened against the world when she realizes that all she has been working toward is gone. When she sees that Mrs. Alving chose to shield her own good name rather than help Regina, Regina knows that middle-class society has no place for her.

Act 3 (Osvald and Mrs. Alving Alone)

Summary

All the other characters have gone, leaving Mrs. Helene Alving and Osvald Alving alone. Osvald says he has no feelings for his father because he never knew him. He also reveals that although he appreciates Mrs. Alving's feelings for him, he has no real love for her. He hopes, however, that she will be useful to him during his illness.

Osvald reveals his own secret: that his illness is the syphilis he is said to have inherited from his father. He explains to his mother that he will become mentally and physically incapacitated. Mrs. Alving tries to run from the room, but Osvald locks them in. He shows her a box of morphine pills and asks her to use them to end his life when his end is near. She recoils in horror, but he is soon slumped motionless in his chair, mumbling for "the sun." Panic-stricken, she now faces a terrible choice.

Analysis

Osvald Alving again offers the play's critique of a society with outdated traditions. Mrs. Helene Alving is an enlightened thinker in many ways, but she still expects a child to have affection for his parents, even though he never knew them. Osvald dismisses this notion as an "old superstition." Her ideals are stuck somewhere between the society that produced her and Osvald's progressive thinking.

The theme of consequences comes to fruition here, as Osvald faces the deadly consequence of his parents' actions. He becomes the embodiment of a past that haunts the future. Even the promise of the sun, a symbol of life and freedom, comes too late.

As Mrs. Alving stands holding the morphine pills, Henrik Ibsen distills the plot of the play into one moment of inaction rather than action. Her entire life has been filled with choices: to stay married or to leave, to send her son away or keep him home, to reveal her husband's life or cover it up. Ibsen gives the audience a final scene with no clear conclusion. He makes spectators uncomfortable as they wonder what Mrs. Alving will do. Spectators are forced to think about what their own responses would be, as well.

“” Quotes

"One doesn't have to recount to all and sundry everything one reads and thinks within one's own four walls."

— Pastor Manders, Act 1 (Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving)

Pastor Manders thinks the books Mrs. Helene Alving is reading are scandalous and that she should keep her progressive ideas to herself to avoid public disapproval. His comments also hint at his own fear of revealing anything to the public that would make him seem less than holy.

"But this is the very essence of the rebellious spirit, to crave happiness here in this life. What right have we human beings to happiness? No, we must do our duty, Mrs. Alving!"

— Pastor Manders, Act 1 (Mrs. Alving's Secrets)

Pastor Manders lectures Mrs. Helene Alving, as he has done in the past, claiming that duty to religion, society, and public appearances trump personal happiness, even if it means living a life of lies. This conflict between duty and happiness is a key tension in the play.

"It was your proper role to bear with a humble heart that cross that a higher will saw fit to lay upon you. But instead, you rebelliously cast away the cross, left the groping soul you should have aided, went off and risked your good name and reputation and—nearly ruined other reputations in the bargain."

— Pastor Manders, Act 1 (Mrs. Alving's Secrets)

Pastor Manders uses God and religion to enforce traditional roles for women, who should welcome a life of hardship. Women seeking happiness are "rebellious." Men seeking happiness, even when they treat women poorly, deserve help. However, what he is really worried about is his own reputation.

"All your life you've been governed

by an incorrigible spirit of willfulness. Instinctively you've been drawn to all that's undisciplined and lawless."

— Pastor Manders, Act 1 (Mrs. Alving's Secrets)

Pastor Manders conveys a typical idea of the time: women are all instinct and emotion, not reason and intelligence. Mrs. Helene Alving is clearly smart and intellectually inquisitive, but because she is a woman striving for personal fulfillment, she is bound to be deplored and decried.

"He was one of those people whose lives never detract from their reputation."

— Mrs. Helene Alving, Act 1 (Mrs. Alving's Secrets)

In describing Captain Alving, Mrs. Helene Alving sums up the essence of hypocrisy, which society enables. No matter how he acted, Captain Alving could present a false front (with Mrs. Alving's help) and be revered by the community.

"I thought the child would be poisoned just breathing this polluted air. That's why I sent him away. And now you can understand, too, why he never set foot in this house as long as his father lived. No one will know what that cost me."

— Mrs. Helene Alving, Act 1 (Mrs. Alving's Secrets)

Although Mrs. Helene Alving's motives were pure and her

sacrifice real, she does not yet realize that Oswald Alving was poisoned anyway, biologically, when he is said to have inherited his father's syphilis. This idea that the past is inescapable is key to the plot.

"We mustn't stir up any scandal."

— Pastor Manders, Act 1 (Mrs. Alving's Secrets)

Pastor Manders expresses the rule that governs his life. He is obsessed with avoiding scandal, or even the appearance of scandal, even at the expense of his and others' happiness.

"Yes, always law and order! I often think they're the root of all our miseries on earth."

— Mrs. Helene Alving, Act 2 (After Dinner)

Mrs. Helene Alving has learned throughout her own painful life experiences that when law and order are allowed to squash an individual's attempts at happiness, misery is the only possible result. She chose law and order, and the consequences were a miserable marriage and an absent, missing child.

"But I can't stand it any longer, with all these webs of obligation. I can't stand it! I've got to work my way out to freedom."

— Mrs. Helene Alving, Act 2 (After Dinner)

Mrs. Helene Alving edges closer to making a break with her past. To work her way to freedom, she must tell the truth about her life. She felt an obligation to cover up her husband's indiscretions, and the lies became a prison. Like Oswald Alving, she equates working toward something, whether a clear conscience or a painting, with salvation.

"When I heard Regina and Oswald in there, it was as if I was seeing ghosts. But I almost believe we are ghosts, all of us, Pastor. It's not only what we inherit from our fathers and mothers that keeps on returning in us. It's all kinds of old dead doctrines and opinions and beliefs, that sort of thing."

— Mrs. Helene Alving, Act 2 (After Dinner)

Mrs. Helene Alving expresses a key message of the play, recalling the behavior Oswald Alving seems to have inherited from his father. But the conservative mindset, represented by Pastor Manders, also haunts one's choices and warps one's thinking, which can also ruin the future.

These lines also can refer to Henrik Ibsen's theater. His plays were being condemned for not fitting the "old dead doctrines" of drama. He is breaking from those ghosts and creating a new doctrine of staging, character development, and theatrical realism.

"The sins of the father are visited upon the children."

— Oswald Alving, Act 2 (Oswald, Regina, and the Fire)

Oswald Alving repeats his doctor's assessment of his illness. He thinks his doctor was wrong, because he still believes his father lived respectably.

"And my house for wayfaring seamen—that's going to be known as 'Captain Alving's Home,' yes."

"And if I get to run that house after my own devices, I think I can promise you it'll be truly worthy of that great man's memory, bless him."

— Engstrand, Act 3 (Engstrand Takes the Blame)

Engstrand slyly declares the truth. His house for seaman, really a house of prostitution, will in many ways represent Captain Alving and his life as a womanizer. Engstrand's project is another example of something that is not what it seems.

"There's the first light of dawn already on the mountains. It's going to be clear, Oswald! In a little while you'll see the sun."

— Mrs. Helene Alving, Act 3 (Oswald and Mrs. Alving Alone)

Mrs. Helene Alving describes the first glimpse of sun since the play began. Once the truth is told, the darkness of a lifetime of secrets vanishes like the rain to reveal the sun. The air is clear, literally and figuratively.

"Mother, give me the sun."

— Oswald Alving, Act 3 (Oswald and Mrs. Alving Alone)

The sun represents Oswald Alving's life in Europe, the assumed land of free love, the joy of life, and people who live honestly in spite of society's rules. The sun contrasts with the dreary rain and clouds of Norway, where hypocrisy, repression, and attention to duty, to Henrik Ibsen, snuff out the joys of life.

Symbols

Orphanage

Henrik Ibsen uses the orphanage built in honor of Captain Alving to represent hypocrisy. Mrs. Helene Alving builds the orphanage with Captain Alving's money to burnish his reputation, as well as to keep Oswald Alving from inheriting anything from his corrupt father. The orphanage creates a false memory within the family and within the community of Captain Alvin as a loving husband and devoted father. Yet, from its inception, the orphanage is a hollow monument. It was not built to honor a good man or to do good in the community but rather to detract attention from a secret immoral life.

Fire

For Ibsen, fire symbolizes the destruction of lives built on lies. The Alving estate that built the Captain Alving Memorial Orphan's Home is grounded in falsehood. Mrs. Alving and Captain Alving both lived double lives. The orphanage's destruction by fire represents the failure of this sham union. The play tries to show that no good can come from such rotten roots.

Through destruction, however, the fire also comes to symbolize purification. The fire purifies an institution built on deception, leaving money for Engstrand's brothel, a more fitting tribute to Captain Alving.

Sun

Ibsen uses the sun to represent the joy of life found when individual freedom is pursued. In Norway, the land of Pastor Manders's repressive morality and social conventions, it rains. Oswald Alving, however, grew up in a different environment, one that embraced personal liberty. The sun represents

Oswald's artistic career and the joy he experienced in Paris. He grumbles about the gloomy weather and observes to his mother that at home he never feels the joy of life: "You don't know much about that here." Oswald asks for the sun at the end of the play as he moves closer to death.

Disease

Ibsen uses disease to symbolize the corruption of mind and body created by misplaced devotion to duty and slavish adherence to convention. Captain Alving's and Oswald's joyful natures are stifled by strict social conventions. The desire for sex should be an important and respected force within the family home. Here, however, it is viewed as sinful, and it is driven from the home to find its fruition in dark, seedy locales such as Engstrand's proposed brothel.

Ibsen makes this symbol into something real with Oswald's illness. The syphilis Oswald is said to inherit from his father functions on a symbolic level, not a biologically realistic one; Oswald cannot get syphilis from his father except through sex with him. Nonetheless, the purported disease will cause dementia, failure of the body, and ultimately, death. Captain Alving's infidelity and Mrs. Alving's web of lies poisons their home and leaves their son to face a cruel death: "The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children."

Themes

Individualism

Early in *Ghosts*, Henrik Ibsen introduces a key theme when he raises the topic of individual fulfillment versus an individual being expected to fulfill society's expectations. In the first conversation between Mrs. Helene Alving and Pastor Manders, Mrs. Alving reveals she is willing to entertain views about personal liberty that many consider unacceptable. Pastor Manders is shocked to see what she is reading and even more dismayed to hear that she supports the messages contained in

the "scandalous" books. As Mrs. Alving provides details about her past, it becomes clear that she gave up personal happiness to submit to society's rules. The main action of the play deals with the consequences of that choice.

Ibsen uses Pastor Manders to represent those rules. The pastor is the one who advised Mrs. Alving to return to her husband, whose depraved behavior was already apparent. Rather than support Mrs. Alving's decision to leave her husband and gain happiness, Pastor Manders forced her to return to a husband and marriage she despised. Pastor Manders still judges her harshly, first for wanting to leave her husband and now for thinking that she made a mistake in staying with him. For Pastor Manders, following society's rules is equal to following God's rules, but above all, following the rules means avoiding the appearance of impropriety. This fear of scandal is the base of his beliefs, even his wholehearted endorsement of conventional doctrines.

When Oswald Alving enters the conversation with his mother and Pastor Manders, he firmly positions himself on the side of personal fulfillment. Growing up beyond the reach of Pastor Manders's superficial morality, Oswald offers a view of happiness at direct odds with the conventions of his hometown. Oswald judges people, like those he knows in Paris, on how well and authentically they treat their loved ones and friends. He has seen that the "free love" so abhorrent to Pastor Manders can lead to personal happiness even though, and perhaps because, it is outside of society's rules. Oswald is already what his mother seems to become after her lifetime of devotion to duty.

The plot of *Ghosts* depends on this tension between the beliefs about the individual, represented by Mrs. Alving and Oswald on one hand, and society, represented by Pastor Manders on the other. The characters' positions on these issues drive their choices, which, in turn, drive the action of the play.

Truth versus Lies

Ibsen presents the battle between truth and lies most powerfully in the Alving family. Mrs. Alving in particular is at the center of this struggle. Early in her marriage, Mrs. Alving attempted to find a truthful life for herself by leaving her

drunken and unfaithful husband. But without Pastor Manders's help, she succumbs to society's expectations and returns to her husband. They present a happy marriage to the world, but it is anything but that. He is considered a virtuous man and leader in the community, but he is quite the opposite. Mrs. Alving, too ashamed to expose her husband for what he is and not willing to endure her community's criticism, begins a colossal cover-up. She runs a successful estate on her own, but her husband gets credit for it. She endures and hides his infidelity, even when it results in an illegitimate child conceived in her own home. Mrs. Alving's life is built on deception until she can no longer bear it and tells the truth about her husband and herself. Her series of revelations as she moves from lies to the truth drives the plot.

The theme of truth versus lies gradually creates a feeling of claustrophobia on stage, as characters struggle with problems created by deceit. The setting, a single room, enhances this feeling that the truth is closing in. Mrs. Alving feels smothered by lies and finally breaks free by revealing ugly secrets. But the truth becomes equally frightening for her and others, and characters find themselves stuck with miserable choices once the truth is known. There is no way out for Oswald, as he faces his fatal disease. There is no way out for Regina except eventual prostitution. There is no way out for Pastor Manders unless he allows himself to be blackmailed by Engstrand. There is no way out for Mrs. Alving other than the choice to kill her son. As Oswald locks the door at the end of the play, the set becomes a final prison in which Mrs. Alving must face the truth about her son's illness.

In many ways the theme of truth versus lies echoes the theme of the individual versus society. The characters who cannot find their personal "truth" end up living dishonest lives because they cannot break with society's rules and judgments. Ibsen shows how quickly lies can become a way of life.

Consequences

The theme of consequences runs throughout *Ghosts* as Ibsen drives home the idea that the past can affect, and even determine, the future. Mrs. Alving, her personal history, and the effect it has had on her life and others are at the center of the unfolding action. As a young woman, Mrs. Alving was sent into

an arranged marriage, because her mother and two aunts thought that Captain Alving's money was too good to turn down. As Mrs. Alving says, "the three of them wrote up my bill of sale." In a society in which women had few options for gaining material comfort, Mrs. Alving married Captain Alving even though she did not want to. "One thing is clear," she explains to Pastor Manders, "I never really listened to myself."

The consequences of Mrs. Alving's marriage and self-denial are many and tragic. Early on, she chooses duty over personal happiness. She stayed with Captain Alving, allowed his affairs to continue, and protected his (and her own) reputation. This arrangement produced an illegitimate child with few options for a respectable future, a son doomed to a horrible death, and her own unhappiness. The consequences of past actions are what haunt the characters in *Ghosts*.

Suggested Reading

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