Ghosts Study Guide

Ghosts by Henrik Ibsen

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Introduction

Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* surprises modern audiences with some of the issues that it discusses, including out-of-wedlock children, venereal disease, incest, infidelity, and euthanasia. It is the story of a woman, Mrs. Alving, who is preparing for the opening of an orphanage in memory of her husband, Captain Alving, on the tenth anniversary of his death. The captain was an important and respected man in his community, and Mrs. Alving plans to raise this one great memorial to him so that she will not have to ever again speak of him. She wants to avoid the awful truth: that he was a cheating, immoral philanderer whose public reputation was a sham. Their son Oswald has come home from Paris with the news that he is dying of syphilis, which he contracted in the womb, and planning to marry the family's maid. He hopes that she can nurse him as his illness progresses, and Mrs. Alving has to tell him that the maid is actually Captain Alving's illegitimate daughter.

The "ghosts" in this play are the taboo topics that cannot be openly discussed. This drama is one of Ibsen's most powerful works, but also one of his most controversial. Its initial publication sold only a few copies, with most of those printed returned to the publisher and no new edition printed until thirteen years later. It was not performed in Ibsen's native Norway for almost a decade after its world debut in Chicago. In 1898, at a dinner in Ibsen's honor at the Royal Palace in Stockholm, King Oscar II expressed the opinion that *Ghosts* was not a good play, and that Ibsen should not have written it. After a moment of silence, the playwright replied, "Your majesty, I had to write *Ghosts.*"

Author Biography

Henrik Ibsen was born in 1828 to a wealthy family in Skien, on the east coast of Norway. His father's ancestors had been seafarers; his mother came from a family of the most prominent merchants in the town. During the early years of his life, Ibsen grew up in luxury. His father owned one of the most prosperous stores in Skein, and the family had servants and a stable of horses and a house in the country. That changed early in the author's life, in 1835, when a drop in timber prices forced his father into bankruptcy. The store was lost, the house was sold at auction, and the family had to move to a rented house outside of town. Many critics point to the sudden reversal in his family's fortune as a key to Ibsen's later cynicism about the social order.

After the family's fall from social prestige, life became difficult in the Ibsen household. His father became a hot-tempered bully, constantly shouting and arguing. His mother, whom Ibsen adored, became silent and moody. Henrik became withdrawn, interested in reading and in producing puppet shows. He did not get along with many of the neighboring children, but when he did it was more often with the girls than with the boys.

Ibsen dropped out of school at age fifteen and worked for several years as a pharmacist's assistant. He went to Christiana (which has since become known as Oslo) in 1850 and attempted to enroll in Christiana University, only to be rejected after failing the entrance exams in mathematics and Greek. He became an assistant stage manager at the National Theater in Bergen: one of his duties was to write patriotic plays that celebrated the national character of Norway. This was the beginning of his playwriting career.

Critics often divide Ibsen's plays into three groups or stages. The first stage of his writing, from the 1850s through the end of the 1860s, is marked by dry, traditional, nationalistic plays. These plays were often based in Norwegian legends, such as tales of the Vikings. *Ghosts* belongs to the second period, which is considered to be the most artistically productive. Starting from 1863, and for twenty-seven years after, he lived abroad in Italy and Germany, returning to Norway only once. The plays in this second period are realistic, driven by dialog and not theatrical conventions, while challenging social morality. Also included in this stage are the well-known plays *A Doll's House* (1879) and *An Enemy of the People* (1882). This phase of realism hit its high point with *Hedda Gabler* in 1890. The plays of his last period, during the 1890s, depart from the theme of the individual against society and deal with the individual alone. The most successful of these plays is *The Master Builder* from 1892, which many critics consider Ibsen's most autobiographical work. In 1901, Ibsen's writing career came to an end when he suffered the first of a series of paralyzing strokes. He died in Norway, on May 23, 1906, from complications from the strokes.

Plot Summary

Act I

Ghosts takes place in the library of the country house of Helena Alving, a wealthy widow. It opens with Mrs. Alving's maid, Regina Engstrand, being visited by Jacob Engstrand, who often reminds her that he is her father, although she seems to doubt it he tells her that the church register can prove it. Engstrand has been working nearby as a carpenter, helping to build an orphanage, and when he returns to town, he wants Regina to go with him because he plans on using the money he has earned to open a boarding house for sailors and a tavern; and he wants a woman around: "But there must be a petticoat in the house.... For I want to have it a little lively in the evenings, with singing and dancing, and so forth." When Engstrand leaves, Pastor Manders enters. Engstrand has confided with the pastor about the drunken life he has led, and the pastor supports his new plan and thinks that Regina should be supportive of her father.

Mrs. Alving enters and discusses the plans of the orphanage with the pastor, who is her financial advisor. She is building the orphanage as a memorial to her late husband, who was an honored member of the community. The pastor suggests that the orphanage not be insured, because insuring it might make people doubt her trust in God.

Mrs. Alving's son Oswald, a painter, enters. He shocks the pastor with talk about couples living together and having children in Paris, where he has recently lived. When he steps out, Pastor Manning tells Mrs. Alving that she should be a better mother. He reminds her that she left Chamberlain Alving early in their marriage, but that after the pastor convinced her to return to her husband, Alving turned out to be a fine husband. She tells him that Alving was never faithful, that he had an affair with the maid, who was Regina's mother. At the end of the scene, she hears Oswald in the next room, making sexual advances toward Regina.

Act II

Later the same day, after dinner, Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders talk about ending the flirtation between Oswald and Regina, who are brother and sister. She does not want to send Regina to live with Engstrand, who married a pregnant girl and raised her child for money. Engstrand enters and asks the pastor to lead a prayer meeting at the new orphanage. When Manders asks Engstrand about Regina, he explains that he did not personally profit, that the money given to Regina's mother was all spent on the child's education. He asks for the pastor's help with his planned home for sailors: "[I]t too might be a sort of orphanage, in a manner of speaking. There are many temptations for seafaring folk ashore. But in this Home of mine, a man might feel as under a father's eye, in a manner of speaking."

When they leave, Mrs. Alving talks to Oswald. He has been diagnosed with a disease the play does not use the word syphilis, but the symptoms indicate it. A doctor has told him that the disease was probably with him since birth, although he does not believe that because he was raised to think that his father was morally correct. On his last visit, he says, he casually mentioned taking Regina to Paris for a trip, and on returning he has found out that she has planned her whole life around it. Mrs. Alving invites Regina to sit down with them and drink champagne with them just as Pastor Manders returns from the prayer at the orphanage. He is about to tell Oswald and Regina that they are related, but they look out the window and see that the orphanage is on fire.

Act III

Engstrand says that he saw Pastor Manders start the fire, that he snuffed out a candle and threw it among wood shavings, although the pastor does not remember even having held a candle. Mrs. Alving says that she has no intention of rebuilding the orphanage, that the pastor can do what he wants with the leftover money, and Engstrand suggests he use it to support the sailors' home. Mrs. Alving tells Oswald and Regina that Chamberlain Alving was Regina's father, and Regina is not surprised; instead, she turns out to be selfish, wanting to leave as soon as she knows that she cannot marry Oswald, unwilling to spend her days caring for a sick man. Mrs. Alving tells her that she is always welcome to return if she ever needs a home, and Regina responds that there is one place she knows she will always have a right to: the sailors' home.

MRS ALVING: Regina now I see it you're going to your ruin. REGINA: Oh, stuff! Good-bye.

After Regina has gone, Mrs. Alving muses over the idea that she might not have been the victim of Chamberlain Alving's terrible behavior, but rather the cause of it, making him live in a small provincial town when he might have been more suited for a large city. She promises to take care of Oswald in his illness. Oswald shows her some pills that he was going to tell Regina to poison him with if the next attack of his illness destroyed his brain. As the sun comes up, he sits in a chair, facing away from the window, and says, "Mother, give me the sun." After that, he does not move and only repeats, "The sun. The sun." Mrs. Alving takes the box of pills from his pocket, and before she gives them to Oswald, the curtain falls.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

Ghosts is set in the late 19th century in the spacious parlor of the country estate of the Alving family, near one of the large fjords (a narrow deep inlet of the sea between high cliffs) of Western Norway.

Mrs. Alving, the owner of the estate, is building an orphanage in the area as a memorial to her late husband, who died from a venereal disease at a young age. The orphanage is almost complete, and the dedication ceremony will take place the following day. While her husband, who was called by the honorary titles of both Captain and Chamberlain, has been considered a hero and a civic leader, his life was, in fact, a sham, lived out in dissipation. The success of the estate has come about because of Mrs. Alving's hard work and management skills, even though her husband received the credit and notoriety for their good fortune. The money to purchase the land and build the orphanage is exactly the amount he had when she married him, no more, no less. "That was my purchase price," she says. She wants their child, Oswald, to inherit only what she has been able to earn using her own ingenuity.

Mrs. Alving's maid, Regine, is frequently visited by her father, Engstrand, the workman who has been building the orphanage. He is trying to persuade Regine to come home and live with him. She resists and has her eye on Oswald, the son of the Alvings, an artist, who is visiting. Engstrand has saved enough money to start what he says will be a hotel for seamen, but in fact, is to be a brothel. He wants Regine to come and work for him there, but she has refused. Regine has been brought up and educated by Mrs. Alving, almost as a member of the family.

Pastor Manders, a friend of the Alvings, has been in charge of the business affairs of the orphanage project, including deeds and investments. Mrs. Alving had tried to leave her husband after only a year of marriage because of his philandering and drinking. Mrs. Alvings and Manders had been in love with each other at one time, and when she left her husband, she fled to the pastor. He sent her home, not because it was the wise thing to do or even the right thing, but because he believed it was her duty to serve and look after and not to judge. Manders has believed the local reputation of Captain Alving - that he was a good and upstanding citizen and husband. Mrs. Alving, however, corrects him by telling him that Captain Alving constantly drank, caroused, and had an affair with their maid.

Pastor Manders condemns the books that Mrs. Alving has been reading. She insists that the books she reads seem to explain and confirm many of the things she thinks and feels; she asks what he has against them. He answers that he doesn't waste his time reading them but has heard about them. She accuses him of condemning the books without reading them. Manders retorts that one must often count on the opinions of others in making judgments about what is right and what is wrong.

Manders brings up the matter of insuring the orphanage. Mrs. Alving replies that she could not afford to make repairs to the building if it were lost in a fire. She feels that it should be insured just as her own holdings are insured. Manders, however, says that if they buy insurance for structures that are dedicated to the public good, people of influence might say that they are short on faith. He feels that his reputation could be harmed if he appears to be lacking in faith because he has insured the buildings. So, lest his reputation suffer, they agree that there will be no insurance on the buildings.

Oswald, Mrs. Alving's son, has not been well, and has come home for an indefinite stay. He has been living in an artist colony, a life that is in sharp contrast to the system of morality preached by Manders, and the pastor feels compelled to voice his objections. As Mrs. Alving and the pastor talk, Oswald comes downstairs smoking his father's pipe, and the pastor is struck by his resemblance to his father. "When Oswald was standing there in the door, with that pipe in his mouth, he looked the very spit and image of his father," Manders says. Oswald has gained some prominence with his paintings but has not been able to work for awhile.

Manders and Mrs. Alving have completed their business, and Oswald has gone to the dining room to get a drink before dinner. Sounds coming from the dining room indicate that he has propositioned Regine, the maid. Mrs. Alving is horrified. "Ghosts!" she says, "come back to haunt us."

Act 1 Analysis

Whatever else can be said about Ibsen, who wrote this play in 1881, he was certainly ahead of his time with this play about free thought and independent women. The story is possible, because during this period there was not effective treatment for syphilis since antibiotics had not yet been discovered.

The themes in the story are suggested in the first act: the ability of a woman to take over a man's work and do it effectively and successfully, the devastating effect of venereal disease in the 19th century, the disaster that debauchery can bring upon a life and a family, duty over everything else, and the oppression and cruelty of conventional marriage.

We see a remarkable foreshadowing in this act when Oswald looks so much like his father that the pastor is astonished. We will see later that Oswald, himself, has lived a life free of moral restraints, and in a twist at the end, we find that he was doomed to an early death from the day he was born because of his father's syphilis. We will also see that Pastor Manders views the world with blinders on and has allowed himself to be deceived from the outset by the community's perception of Captain Alving as a heroic and upstanding figure.

The polarities - the conflicts - are set up in this act also. Ibsen, the realist, is depicting the sham that religion is in its application to real life. The pastor is an empty vessel when it comes to meeting the needs of his parishioners. He can only spout platitudes.

He does not get the point of the tragedy in this family, and he is taken in by Engstrand, who plays him like a fiddle. This play is about the conflict between religion and reality, and religion does not come off at all well. At another level, the tensions are between the conventional marriage and the reality that it not only unfairly deprives the wife of joy and fulfillment but victimizes her. Manders is, of course, the agent who has been directly responsible for Mrs. Alving being stuck in this intolerable situation.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

In act 2, Manders and Mrs. Alving discuss their courtship, which was interrupted when Captain Alving began to court Mrs. Alving and she acquiesced to his offer of marriage under the pressure of her family. He was, after all, a good catch. Manders, according to type, tells her it was "in accord with law and order." That, she says, is the cause of the trouble in the world and declares that she is not putting up with these laws and restrictions any more. She compares her marriage to the Captain to the marriage of Regine's parents, Engstrand and Johanna. She says that in her case, the price was higher, and that she was a coward to marry Alving, knowing what he was like, especially since she was in love with Manders.

She explains what she means by ghosts. She says that hearing Oswald propositioning Regine conjures ghosts, and she feels that everyone is a ghost. "It's not just what we inherit from our mothers and fathers that haunts us. It's all kinds of old defunct theories, all sorts of old defunct beliefs, and things like that." They're lodged in us, she says, and we can't get rid of them. Manders blames the free-thinking publications that she has been reading for her unhappiness. She tells him it is not what she has been reading that is making her unhappy; that it is, in fact, his fault. He forced her to submit to what he saw as her duty and obligations, even though once she was confronted with what her husband was actually like, she could see the truth and her marriage began to unravel.

Oswald had been sent him away to school when he was seven years old, to shield him from the abominations of his father. He has never been told the truth about his father's philandering, and still sees him as ideal. Manders, typically, mouths the platitude that a child should honor his father and mother.

The story of the illegitimate birth of Regine, the maid, is explained in full. When Johanna became pregnant by Alving, she went to Engstrand and persuaded him to marry her, telling him that she had gotten pregnant by some foreign, itinerant sailor. Engstrand, making himself look put-upon and righteous as always, tells how he, out of the goodness of his heart, married Johanna, made a home for her, and took care of the child, Regine, claiming she was his own. Engstrand had lied to the pastor, as well as everyone else, regarding the child's parentage, but even he didn't know that the child's biological father was Captain Alving. Engstrand continually bamboozles the pastor into thinking his motives are of the highest order. Engstrand now comes in and announces that the work on the orphanage is finished and requests that the pastor come and conduct a worship service to celebrate its completion.

Oswald tells Mrs. Alving that he is sick and that his brain is deteriorating. A specialist has told him that the syphilis was with him since his birth, but he wasn't able to accept that since he believed that his father was such an outstanding man so Oswald rejects the doctor's diagnosis and blames his disease on his lifestyle as an artist. On a previous

trip, he invited Regine to travel with him to Paris, and she is holding him to his promise. Just when Mrs. Oswald is prepared to tell Oswald and Regine about Mr. Alving's true nature, the pastor returns.

Everything is on hold at the end of the second act because the orphanage is on fire. Manders tells Mrs. Alving that "this is a flaming injustice on this house of iniquity." There is, of course, no insurance.

Act 2 Analysis

Some have criticized this play because the plot is too formulaic, too pat. For example, each act ends with a "cliff-hanger." The fire in this act, coming just as Mrs. Alving is ready to make her revelation to Oswald, is an example of the mechanics of a play interfering with overall impression. Even so, the old-fashioned cliff-hanger approach is effective, as early movies demonstrated so clearly, and theater-goers tend to like them even if critics do not.

In this act, we see the plot moving toward climax. Mrs. Alving is determined to finish off the old life and its miseries - all of her husband's money is in the orphanage - and create a new life for herself and Oswald free of the factors that have made her so miserable - the rigid conventionality of the pastor and presumably of the community and the degradation of the life she was forced to live with her husband.

Ibsen, a Norwegian, was a failure as a dramatist in his own country, and it wasn't until he left Norway that he gained the freedom he needed to be an effective writer of drama, which was at first poetic in nature. It's worth noting that his first successful drama, a blockbuster success, was *Brand*, and it featured as its protagonist a rural pastor, a firebrand who wielded his position of moral authority ruthlessly, destroying not only his family but all who got in his way. That play ends with Brand standing along, and a voice from on high declaring, "He is a god of love."

In *Ghosts*, Manders is similar to Brand in that he has not gotten the message that God is love, although he does not have the power that Brand had. Manders is weak and will be destroyed by his own blindness to the truth. At the same time, he has been instrumental in the destruction of the Alving family. If he had done what was right when Mrs. Alving came to him early in her marriage to this corrupt, dissipated man, her life would have turned out differently and she would not have born a son who was doomed to pay with his life for the sins of his father.

The setting of this play, the conventional parlor of a wealthy estate, is appropriate. It underscores the sham of this conventional marriage, of conventional morals, of conventionality in general. It's also appropriate that this play about white-hot emotions and their destructive force is set in Norway, the frozen north. The contrast is startling. The scenery is rugged and forbidding, yet the people living here are subject to raging emotional impulses - not only the Captain, but Oswald, Johanna, and Regine. In contrast, we have Manders, whose persona is based on controlling all feeling, all

emotion; yet his emotions are manipulated by Engstrand so that the good pastor comes to the sappy conclusion that this shallow, manipulative man is the one who is morally on target.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

The fire was caused by Manders' carelessness in putting out the candles after the ceremony celebrating the completion of the church, and only Engstrand knows it. The pastor knows there will be an investigation, and the only witness is Engstrand. Engstrand blackmails the pastor for the money to build his Seamen's Home, which he intends to name Captain Alving's Home. Mrs. Alving washes her hands of the whole business, telling Manders to handle everything. She wants no more part of the hypocritical effort to honor her late husband.

Mrs. Alving tells Oswald and Regine the truth about Captain Alving. She blames herself for his boredom when he was young because he had no occupation, only a title. She believes that she was so focused on doing her duty in their marriage, that she brought little light into his life, causing him to live an irresponsible life, drinking and carousing. Regine also learns the truth about her parentage and reacts by leaving, running to catch the boat. She will live her life as she pleases, she tells them, seeking pleasure rather than duty.

Oswald now tells his mother that the syphilis has invaded his brain and that he has already had one attack. He says that he eventually will have another and then will need to be cared for like a baby. She declares that she will care for him. However, he has twelve morphine tablets he intends to use to end his life and his misery and exacts from her a promise that she will give them to him when the attack comes; otherwise, he could linger for years, he says, and he doesn't want that.

He has the attack; he is no longer coherent, and the play ends with his mother looking for the morphine.

Act 3 Analysis

Irony, described as "an incongruity between what is expected and what occurs" is used deliberately here by Ibsen - perhaps a little too deliberately, the critics would say - when he has Engstrand's brothel built with money set aside for the orphanage (her "purchase price," says Mrs. Alving) but it is to be named Captain Alving's Home. It is, of course, a fitting monument to a man who lived his life in dissipation and whose immorality has caused so much misery, much more fitting than an orphanage. The irony is underscored, of course, by the fact that the money is obtained by Engstrand by blackmailing the very proper Pastor Manders, whose whole life and career are built on the sham foundation of appearances, not what is right or true. There is the suggestion that Engstrand, himself, might have set the fire, thereby setting the pastor up for the blackmail.

The pastor is putty in the hands of a crook like Engstrand, and Ibsen is saying here that not only is the kind of religion Pastor Mandors represents wrong and off-track for what religion should do and be, but that it is laughably stupid and ignorant, not the intelligent, thoughtful, responsible handling that important ethical and moral issues deserve. He also makes the point that the inevitable result is disaster.

The climax in this story comes with the fire when all the good intentions go up in flames and all the ugly truths are revealed. It is also in the fire that Engstrand, the essence of evil in this play, is able to triumph. The message is that, with our religion in the hands of the Manders of the world, evil is bound to triumph.

The denouyment, the unraveling, occurs when Engstrand goes off to build his hotel, naming it for the Captain, Regine leaves to make a life of her own, and Mrs. Alving is left to care for Oswald in his final illness.

Characters

Mrs, Helena Alving

Mrs. Alving is the widow of Captain Alving, a well-respected man in the community who has been dead for ten years. She is preparing to open an orphanage named after him to serve the nearby town. When Pastor Manders accuses her of failing to provide Oswald with enough moral guidance, he reminds Mrs. Alving that she has left her husband during her first year of marriage, but that he turned out all right after she returned to him. This prompts Mrs. Alving to tell the truth that she had kept hidden. Captain Alving was an awful man who was unfaithful throughout their marriage. The orphanage is to be built with all of the money Captain Alving had when he married her, and she will live on the money that she made from managing their investments after their marriage; in this way, she hopes to free herself of anything to do with him.

In the course of this play, Mrs. Alving loses her connection with conventional morality. She feels that social convention is false, and that she can put pretense behind her when she distances herself from Captain Alving's memory after naming the orphanage after him. In the last act, though, her view on life is turned around. Instead of seeing herself as a long-silent victim of Captain Alving's hedonistic ways, she sees that he was a victim of her.

Oswald Alving

Oswald is Mrs. Alving's son, who came home the day before the play begins. He has been living in Paris, where his work as an painter has been successful enough to earn coverage in the local Norwegian papers.

While Oswald was growing up, Mrs. Alving attempted to protect him from his father's bad influence by sending him away to school at an early age. The one memory of his father that Oswald talks about in the play is when he was a very young boy, and Captain Alving took him up on his knee and gave him his pipe to smoke. Seeing him smoking his father's pipe, Pastor Manders is shocked by how much Oswald looks like Captain Alving. Oswald has, in fact, grown up to be quite a lot like his father, in spite of his mother's attempts to prevent such a fate. He smokes, and he drinks, and he has relations with women outside of marriage. Soon after Mrs. Alving tells the pastor about her husband's affair with their maid, she finds Oswald carrying on with the present maid, just as his father did.

Jacob Engstrand

In some ways, Engstrand is the mirror image of the late Captain Alving, who is frequently talked about in this play but who died ten years before the play's time. Both men are drinkers and opportunists, willing to lie to secure their good names in society.

Mrs. Alving has hired Jacob to work on the orphanage, and he plans to use the money that he has earned to open a business in town. The purpose of the place changes early in the first act, he refers to it as a "tavern" for sailors, though by the last act, when he is asking for funding from the pastor, he talks about the place as if it were a rest home for retired sailors, "sort of an Orphanage," which he presents as a charity by naming it "Captain Alving's Home." In an ironic reflection on the immorality of both himself and the unfaithful Captain Alving, he describes the home as the sort of place where "a man might feel under a father's eye."

Regina Engstrand

During the course of this play, Regina's character changes from that of the doting servant who is in love with the master of the house to that of a cold manipulator. She is the first character on the stage. When Engstrand comes in, she shows concern for Oswald, who is napping upstairs. Engstrand wants to include Regina in his scheme to open a tavern, offering her money to be made and the opportunity to marry a rich man, or to be paid off by a rich man who gets her pregnant, and Regina is offended by the offer. When Mrs. Alving invites Regina to sit down and have some champagne with her and Oswald at the end of Act II, Regina thinks she is being treated as one of the family because she is to marry Oswald, unaware that she is part of the family because she is Oswald's sister.

In the last act, when she is told that she is the daughter of Captain Alving, Regina immediately asks to leave. Her concern for Oswald turns out to have been built on what he could do for her, and so she has decided immediately that there is nothing to help her ambitions.

Pastor Manders

Throughout the play, the pastor speaks for conventional morality, even though he does not seem to deeply believe in the course of action that convention would require. This is made most clear in his deliberation over whether or not to insure the orphanage. He says that he would not have any problem with insuring it, but that it might cause a scandal among people who might see insurance as a sign that he does not have enough faith in God to keep the building safe. He is so afraid of the prospect of scandal that he advises against insurance.

Reality is not of primary concern to Pastor Manders. In Act II, when Mrs. Alving has regrets about not having told Oswald how disreputable his father was, Manders takes the position that it was more important to give the boy ideals than to tell him the truth. This concern for inner serenity over understanding what actually happened may account for why he so adamantly denies the attraction that Mrs. Alving says once was mutual.

Because he is more concerned with appearance than with true moral behavior, Pastor Manders is a dupe for Engstrand, who address the pastor humbly as "your Reverence"

and pretends to defer to Manders, all the while having his way. As a result of not being able to see when Engstrand is being false, Manders actually believes that he has struggled against being a lazy drunkard, although he has no evidence of this except Engstrand's word. In the end, he believes Engstrand's claim that he saw Manders start the fire with the candle, even though the pastor does not remember holding a candle in his hand, and he runs away from all of his responsibilities in the town, rather than face up to the possible negative opinion that would follow from the fire.

Themes

Deception

The main conflict of this play stems from the fact that Mrs. Alving feels remorse for her part in helping to deceive the world about what sort of man Captain Alving was. She feels that she should have told the truth to Oswald long ago. If she had been honest with him all along, the disease that he inherited from his father may still have been unavoidable, but she could have saved him the confusion that he felt upon finding out that his father, who he thought was morally pure, had syphilis. His own character might have been less cynical if the truth about his father had not come as such a shock.

For his part, Pastor Manders supports the idea of deception. When Mrs. Alving talks about truth, he counters her with talk about ideals. He tells her that, regardless of what the true facts are, Oswald needs to have ideals, that she should not sour his image of his father if that is something that Oswald thinks he can believe in.

In the end, the pastor's belief in deception turns against him. Because his own ideal is that Engstrand is basically a decent, if weak, person, he is more willing to believe what Engstrand says about the fire at the orphanage than what he himself remembers. Pastor Manders falls for a simple deception almost willingly because his grasp on truth is so completely flexible.

Loyalty

In *i*, the only true loyalty is between Mrs. Alving and her son. All other instances of loyalty seem pure, but they are actually based in social usefulness. The first example of this sort of insincere loyalty is in the early scene between Engstrand and Regina. He asks her to help him with the sailors' home, making a feigned attempt to be concerned about her because she is his daughter. He is not intelligent enough, however, to stick with his case and eventually admits that he wants her there because it would be good for business to have a woman around. Later, he is just as transparently insincere about his loyalty when he tells Manders,"Jacob Engstrand may be likened to a guardian angel, he may, your Reverence." The danger that he professes to "guard" the parson against is the charge that he burned down the orphanage, which is a charge that Engstrand himself made up.

Manders claims to be loyal to the sanctity of marriage. When discussing the time when Helena Alving came to his home after leaving his husband, though, his main focus is on the possible scandal that could have ensued. He's less motivated by loyalty to religious and social doctrine than by fear of repercussions.

Oswald pretends to be loyal to Regina, the maid, but later on, after he reveals the facts about his disease, he talks about how he has counted on her to look after him when his disease makes him an invalid. Regina, for her part, professes her loyalty to Oswald until

she finds out that they cannot be married and that he is ill. These are good reasons to not marry him and to realize that they will not have the relationship that she thought they would have, but she is extreme in tossing her loyalty aside, making plans to leave the house the very minute that she hears the news.

Moral Corruption

Ibsen uses Oswald's disease to symbolize the corruption that is handed down from previous generations. When he tells his mother about being diagnosed, Oswald even quotes the doctor as making a statement that indicates a moral judgment beyond his medical one: "The sins of the fathers are visited on the children." This makes sense because, in a strictly physical sense, it is Captain Alving's blood that infected his unborn son. It makes just as much sense in a completely moral frame, too, because Oswald, after finding out that his father was sexually active, took on many of the same qualities. The facts that he smokes his father's pipe, that he drinks constantly, and especially that he flirts with the family maid, just as his father did, are all directly related to being his father's son. Ibsen uses the transmission of the syphilis infection to represent the fact that immorality passes from generation to generation as if it were a genetic condition.

The way that morality is carried through a family is also examined in the example of Regina. Throughout much of the play, she behaves as her mother did: she is a maid, conspicuously at the same house where her mother worked, and she is willing to be the mistress of a wealthy man to get what she wants. When she finds out that she is Captain Alving's daughter, she refers to the Sailor's Home that is named after him as "one house where I've every right to a place." It is not a decent place for a woman, but her connection with Engstrand and with the Captain make it her birthright.

Pastor Manders worries that Mrs. Alving will be morally corrupted by reading new, free-thinking ideas, but the readings that he finds dangerous make her feel more secure. Rather than corrupting her, they just let her know that she is not alone in the way she sees things: as she tells him, "I seem to find explanation and confirmation of all sorts of things that I myself have been thinking."

Victim and Victimization

Ibsen's style of realism does not allow for even the most downtrodden of characters to look like a victim. The most tragic figure in the play is Oswald, who suffers from a disease that was contracted by his father and who did not know that he was infected, did not even think that he could be infected, for much of his life. Still, his condition cannot be called victimization because his is not a decent personality that is being taken advantage of. At heart, Oswald is self-centered. He hates the thought of being ill because it will incapacitate him, and he is full of life. His attitude toward his mother is best summarized when he says, "you can be so very useful to me, now that I'm ill." His relationship with Regina, too, is based on what she can do to help him in his illness. In a

sense, the victim of the inherited venereal disease uses his misfortune to justify victimizing everyone around him.

In the course of the play, Mrs. Alving comes to reconsider her relationship with Captain Alving. At first, she tells Pastor Manders of the ways in which she was the captain's victim. She describes her life with and without him, as a life and death struggle to keep Oswald from knowing his father's true nature, although she later calls herself a coward for not telling him the truth. She describes the measures that she took to keep him home nights, so that he would not ruin his reputation by going to town and chasing women. She later regrets her actions, taking the responsibility on herself instead of blaming him for her actions; in fact, by the final act she sees him as her victim, because she suppressed "the overpowering joy of life that was in him."

Style

Realism

Realism, as a literary movement, flourished in the United States and Europe in the late 1800s, which is when *Ghosts* was written. In response to romanticism, which presented a version of reality that was twisted through human perception, realism marked an attempt to capture the truth about life, especially the ugly elements of truth that people would rather ignore. Realist literature is often associated with suffering, with disease and corruption, because these are the elements of life that romantic literature shied away from. *Ghosts* comes from a period in Ibsen's career that is considered his realist period, during which he wrote about social issues that disturbed him and his audience, with the hope that examining such unpleasant truths would lead to social change. In this play, he is unmasking the hypocrisy that is usually behind memorials to great civic leaders, looking at the damage that a man with a great reputation might leave in his wake, the "ghosts" that linger.

Setting

All three acts of this play take place in the same setting: the garden-room of Mrs. Alving's house. Keeping the action contained to this one place gives the play several distinguishing aspects. First, the small, enclosed, limited set keeps audiences' attention focused on the characters and how they are interacting with one another. The human drama takes precedence over the exterior trappings that are necessary, but incidental.

This one particular location is meaningful because it is where the past, which affects the present in a ghostly way, took place. This house is where Captain Alving lived; through the doors is the dining room where Helena Alving saw him accost the maid; the bleak fjords on the landscape outside of the windows have defined Mrs. Alving's world for most of her life. No other set would convey as much about what life was like in that house thirty years earlier, when the Alvings were newlyweds, when the trouble all began. If ghosts haunt this family, this specific setting is the locus of their haunting ground.

Symbolism

A writer of Ibsen's caliber will always present objects that resonate with meaning beyond their actual function in the play. In Ghosts, several stand out as particularly noteworthy. The most obvious is the orphanage. An orphanage is, of course, a place for children who are left alone in the world without parents. By erecting an orphanage as a memorial, Mrs. Alving is able to accomplish two aims at once. She creates a public institution that benefits the community and enhances the prestige of the person it is named after, but, in making the memorial an orphanage, she also creates a subtle, sarcastic commentary on how the captain treated his own children. In the course of the

play, the orphanage, which was to be a tribute to a man who did not deserve one, burns down, indicating that such deception is destined to fail.

The second most important symbolic element is Oswald's disease. Although the script does not name it, the symptoms match those of syphilis. Two aspects of syphilis make it symbolically important in a story like this. The first is the fact that it is spread through intercourse; Captain Alving would never have had the disease if he had been the morally proper man that he and those around him pretended he was. The second aspect is that it can be passed down from parents to unborn children as Oswald quotes his doctor, "The sins of the father are visited upon the children." There is also a biblical reference to the doctrine of Original Sin, which states that all humans are born sinful because of the sin of the first human, Adam. The doctor, after examining him, told Oswald, "You have been worm-eated from your birth."

A minor, but significant, object that has meaning beyond its actual existence is the champagne glass. In Act II, Regina is invited to drink champagne with Mrs. Alving and Oswald. Because she is the maid, she is apprehensive, but since she does have hopes of marrying Oswald she can believe that the invitation is legitimate. Before they can drink, though, they are interrupted, first by the entrance of Pastor Manders and then by the orphanage burning in the distance. When they come back from the fire, the champagne bottle is still unopened, and Mrs. Alving tells Oswald and Regina that he is her brother. Before leaving the house, Regina takes a bitter glance at the champagne that she was not able to have and remarks, "I may come to drink champagne with gentlefolks yet." Although she lived there and, as she tells Engstrand in the first act, was "treated almost as a daughter here," drinking champagne represents a class barrier that she has been unable to cross.

Historical Context

Norway in the 1880s

Ibsen lived away from Norway from 1863 to 1891. Rather than distancing him from the character of the Norwegian people, though, critics note that this separation helped him understand his native land better. Throughout the 1800s, Norway was a land of peaceful self-assurance, left alone to rule itself while still formally under the control of Sweden. This period of independence was a result of the Napoleonic Wars, which changed the organization of Scandinavia as much as they changed almost all of Europe's political structure. Norway had been a province of Denmark for several centuries, from 1381 to 1814, but was taken from Norway, which supported Napoleon, and given over to Swedish rule because Sweden had supported the Russians, who eventually defeated the French. Sweden allowed Norway a great deal of independence. The Norwegian constitution, drafted in 1815, gave more political power to the Norwegian king's council than to ministers from Sweden, whose power was limited to advising. Norway came to be one of Europe's most independent and also one of its wealthiest countries, with the third largest merchant navy on the planet.

One result of this peace, prosperity, and independence was that social issues were examined with greater seriousness than they were in countries just struggling for subsistence. Issues of moral conduct were examined by radical social organizations that would have been outlawed in stricter countries. Also, questions of marriage and sexuality, which would have been left to church decree in the Catholic countries of Europe, were open to discussion in Norway, which was predominantly Lutheran. Ghosts was still a shock to Norwegian audiences when it debuted, but it would have been unthinkable to raise some of the issues it raises in a less progressive country.

Realism

Ibsen is considered one of the most important figures in the realist movement that came to dominate literature in Europe and America in the last half of the 1800s. Realism was a reaction to romanticism, which dominated the first half of the century. The romantic movement was about individual freedom the most important writers of that period generally shared the belief that reality was flexible, subject to human interpretation. Beauty was assumed to have its own distinct existence, aside from the world people live in, and it was assumed that people had the power to interpret reality as they saw fit. Leading romantic writers were the poets Keats and Shelly, the essayist Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Edgar Allan Poe. After a while, romantic idealism came to be seen as too dependent on wishful thinking and not connected strongly enough to reality. The realist movement took romantic principles and, in effect, reversed them.

Realism recognized that individuals do not control their environment, but most struggle with it constantly. Realist ideas are evident in Ghosts in the way that the reality of

disease puts a stop to Oswald's artistic ambitions, and the ways that social expectations put limits on what Mrs. Alving is able to do with her life. It was a time when the invisible rules of social interaction were being explored. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution defined the capabilities of the body and drew attention to heredity; Karl Marx proposed the principles of historic inevitability; Sigmund Freud worked at mapping the unseen mechanism of the mind. In the arts, realists like Ibsen, Tolstoy, and Zola did not shy away from showing the miseries that followed when the free-thinking individual was hemmed in by society, but they usually showed misery for a purpose, to shake up old expectations and move people to demand change.

Syphilis

Syphilis is an infectious disease, seldom fatal today but incurable in Ibsen's time. It is usually spread by sexual intercourse with an infected person; because the spirochete that carries the disease cannot live very long in the open, it is almost impossible for syphilis to be transmitted without an exchange of bodily fluids. The first known cases of syphilis in Europe occurred in 1493, leading medical historians to believe that the disease was brought back to the continent by the crew of Christopher Columbus' first expedition to the Americas in 1492. In the following decades, it became a major disease. Its symptoms are similar to those of other diseases, which led to constant confusion about its characteristics before a blood test for diagnosing the disease was developed in 1905. Ibsen's use of the disease in *Ghosts* shows several misconceptions about syphilis, most notably the idea that a child born with it can develop symptoms as late as his twenties; infected newborns sometimes do not develop symptoms until a few weeks after birth, but it does not lie dormant for years.

The first effective treatment for syphilis was developed in 1909, when German-born bacteriologist Paul Ehrlich found that the compound Salvarsan was effective in killing off the spirochete that caused it. Unfortunately, Salvarsan contained arsenic, a deadly poison. In 1943, penicillin was found highly effective as a treatment, and that method is used today. Using an antibiotic program centered on penicillin, doctors have the power to contain syphilis, but in treating the disease scientists are confronted with public attitudes. People with the disease sometimes put off treatment, afraid or ashamed because of its connection with sexual promiscuity. As a result, not all treatable cases are reported to doctors early enough to be cured.

Critical Overview

At the time when he wrote *Ghosts*, Ibsen's career had eased into a phase of social criticism. His previous work, *A Doll's House,* was met with some objection, but it is easily his most popular and influential play to date. Today, critics consider Ibsen one of the most important playwrights of the modern period, pivotal in introducing a new, realistic way of presenting life on the stage. With the publication of *Ghosts,* though, his career almost came to a grinding halt.

Of all of Ibsen's dramas, *Ghosts* is easily the most controversial, crammed tight with social and sexual themes that challenged the conventional morality. Readers rejected the play and refused to buy it when it was released in book form. Theatrical companies also found it too dangerous to risk offending their local communities. Most of the copies printed in the first edition were returned to the publisher, and they did not all sell for thirteen years. As Ibsen biographer Hans Heiberg explains in a chapter titled, "The Great Scandal":

From December 1881 and throughout the whole of 1882, a hurricane continued to blow all through Scandinavia over Ibsen's new play. And it was not only the conservatives who let out a howl. The liberals, too, and most radicals, were so shaken by the explosion that they neither realized what a masterpiece it was, nor that there was balance in it. Most people thought that Ibsen, through the mouth of Mrs. Alving, wanted to legalize incest and advocate sexual license and nihilism.

Scandanavian theaters would not put the play on, and its debut occurred across the ocean, in Chicago, which had a large Norwegian population. Eventually, a company directed by August Lindberg had success with the play in Helsinki, and their subsequent tour met with increasing popularity.

In the following decade, Ibsen's reputation as a masterful playwright who challenged conventions had become even more solidified by his successes with *An Enemy of the People* (1882) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890). William Archer, Ibsen's contemporary, recognized *Ghosts'* power in capturing reality, and dismissed its critics for trying to limit what an artist can write about. "If art is ever debarred from entering upon certain domains of human experience," he wrote in 1889, "then *Ghosts* is an inartistic work. I can only say, after having read it, seen it on the stage, and translated it, that no other modern play seems to me to fulfill so entirely the Aristotelian ideal of purging the soul by means of terror and pity." The unpleasant elements, in other words, were good for audiences, who could free themselves of their own problems through the act of watching.

Because of his strongly-stated political views, Ibsen became a favorite of political activists, who advocated change in almost all areas of life, from woman's rights to socialism to sexual freedom. Early in the twentieth century, Ibsen's works, especially *Ghosts*, were hailed as heroic achievements, as political unrest against the status quo swelled in Europe and in America. A prime example is Emma Goldman, possibly

America's most famous anarchist, who devoted considerable space to the play in her 1914 book *The Social Significance of Modern Drama.* ' 'The social and revolutionary significance of Henrik Ibsen is brought out with even greater force in *Ghosts* than in his preceding works," Goldman wrote. "Not only does this pioneer of modern dramatic art undermine in *Ghosts* the Social Lie and the paralyzing effect of Duty, but the uselessness and evil of Sacrifice, the dreary Lack of Joy and of Purpose in Work are brought to light as most pernicious and destructive elements of life." The end of her review was filled with just as much praise, bordering on hyperbole:

The voice of Henrik Ibsen in [this play] sounds like the trumpets before the walls of Jericho. Into the remotest nooks and corners reaches his voice, with its thundering indictment of our moral cancers, our social poisons, our hideous crimes against unborn and born victims. Verily a more revolutionary condemnation has never been uttered in dramatic form before or since the great Henrik Ibsen.

Martin Esslin, one of the most respected and influential contemporary writers about drama, notes in his book about Ibsen that the great German playwright Bertolt Brecht considered *Ghosts* to have been rendered obsolete by 1928, owing to medical developments in suppressing syphilis. The play has continued, however, because audiences do not look at it as an old-fashioned criticism of our time, as Brecht might have, but as a work that was surprisingly ahead of its own time, that has kept its edge by emphasizing human attitudes over situations. Esslin emphasizes how Ibsen changed the performing world by having characters express their motivation gradually and indirectly through dialogue and action. This is something that audiences take for granted today, but the style of Ibsen's contemporaries called for characters whose motivations were obvious the moment that they stepped out on stage. Esslin traces the development of this technique of spontaneity from Ibsen through Chekhov and the Moscow Theatre to modern avant-garde filmmakers like John Cassavettes and Robert Altman, as well as playwrights like Eugene lonesco and Harold Pinter, whose characters rely on more than just their words to convey who they are.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
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Critical Essay #1

Kelly teaches creative writing and scriptwriting at two colleges in Illinois. In the following essay, he examines the life of Helena Alving, the main character in Ibsen's Ghosts, in terms of one haunting, definitive moment in her past.

In any of Henrik Ibsen's plays there will be layers of characterization, complicated by the lingering presence of events that occurred to the characters years before what is seen presented on the stage. This is especially true of *Ghosts* with its focus on the ways in which people and events that are long gone continue to resonate, how they stay alive from one generation to the next. The most obvious ghosts are those of Johanna the maid and Chamberlain Alving. But they have been dead for years when, seeing her son, Oswald, touching Johanna's daughter Regina in the same dining room where her husband had made a pass at Johanna a generation earlier, Mrs. Alving blurts out the play's title. "I almost think we're all of us Ghosts, Pastor Manders," Mrs. Alving says later, recalling that moment. "It's not only what we have inherited from our father and mother that 'walks' in us. It's all sorts of ideas, and lifeless old beliefs, and so forth.... There must be Ghosts all the country over, as thick as the sands of the sea. And then we are, one and all, so pitifully afraid of the light."

As Mrs. Alving understands it, ghosts are not just the specters of people. Actions cast shadows. Emotions cast shadows. The difficult job for the playwright is to show how long and how deeply an isolated moment from the past can continue to affect one's life.

In *Ghosts*, many of the events of the past twist around another, braided like a rope, but one event in particular seems to be at the center of the Alving family's tragedy: it is the brief moment, nearly thirty years earlier, when Mrs. Alving presented herself to Pastor Manders with the words, "Here I am. Take me." The pastor, of course, did not take her, even though there is every reason to believe that he wanted to. At that brief moment in the past, all of the play's major concerns love, lust, repression, honor, freedom and possibility intersected, and the results of that lost moment are every bit as important as anything in these unfulfilled lives.

This moment in Mrs. Alving's life came when she had been married to Captain Alving for a year and had already learned to regret it. She had been young and fatherless, practically a child, talked into marriage by her mother and aunts who believed that marriage to the dashing young sailor would be glamorous to young Helena because she had no better prospects in her life. Their encouragement was, however, based on the assumption that marriage would change the captain from a sailor to a husband, which in fact it did not. He continued to live like a bachelor Mrs. Alving describes his behavior in the play as "dissolute," a word that defines a lack of moral restraint by emphasizing the fact that his spirit is dissolved, uncontrolled, unfocused. As she says later, the town "had no joys to offer him only dissipations."

To Pastor Manders, the bride he had married to the sailor a year earlier must have looked, as she stood on his doorstep, less like the possibility for romantic love than like

trouble incarnate. He tells her that going to him was "incredibly reckless," wording that in itself shows more his terror of being found with a woman than fear of the danger to her mortal soul. There is every reason to believe that he did not take her seriously, that he just thought of her as a discontent bride who was not willing to accept the unglamorous parts of marriage. Pastor Manders is, after all, presented as a man of duty, a "poor instrument in a Higher Hand," to use his own words. To such a person, anyone not driven by duty would seem to lack proper seriousness. He may have seen young Helena Alving as socially greedy, like Regina Engstrand, who rejects her father's scheme to put her to work as a virtual prostitute in his sailors' home because "Sailors have no *savoir vivre.*

Did he love her, when she showed up at his door saying, "Take me"? If he ever thought in terms of love and hate, then he may have, but the pastor's mind, focused on duty, had no room for emotions. Ideally, a person in his position just would not have any emotions that could cloud his moral judgment. He was human, though, and so, in pursuit of that ideal, he tried throughout his life to quash the emotions that he did have. When Mrs. Alving implies that there was once an emotional bond between them, he is emphatic about his version of the past, so emphatic that he seems to be struggling to turn the version he hoped for into reality. "Never," he says, and then repeats, "never in my most secret thoughts have I regarded you otherwise than as another's wife." Whether or not he is sincere, Mrs. Alving certainly does not take his claim too seriously, responding bemusedly with, "Oh! indeed?" The pastor considers his "victory over myself" to be his greatest victory, while Mrs. Alving considers his denial of his own urges to be his greatest defeat.

That moment, twenty-eight years earlier, defined Mrs. Alving's life to come, sending her on a secret search for innocence. If she had offered herself to him and had been rejected because of her looks, her life might have become a crusade against superficial standards of beauty; if she had been rejected as too poor, she might have become a socialist. When Pastor Manders followed what was "law" instead of his own feelings, Mrs. Alving begins to consider the personal losses one may suffer by doing so and wonders whether sometimes it is better to follow one's own truth rather than what others define as right and acceptable behavior.

The horror of Mrs. Alving's life is that she had to lock herself up in the house in the country, giving in to the captain's "secret orgies" and preserving his bogus reputation, in the quest for the truth. The social world that Manders flung her back into when he rejected her was a sort of maze that she had to wind her way through before reaching her moment of truth. Mrs. Alving needed to learn how to stop living the lies that her role in society forced upon her. Mrs. Alving challenges society's view of her in several ways. She begins reading nonconformist, free-thinking books; raises her son with the sort of sensibilities more comfortable in the artistic community of Paris than provincial Norway; and, raises a memorial to Captain Alving, leaving her free to pursue less reputable inquiries. As she explains to Pastor Manders, her quest for truth began "when you forced me under the yoke you called Duty and Obligation; when you praised as right and proper what my whole soul rebelled against as something loathsome."

With the orphanage that she has erected, Captain Alving's false image as a humanitarian is supposed to take on a life of its own, so that it can leave her alone to pursue her own interests; instead, her acceptance of this fraud destroys her, proving that a future of truthfulness cannot be built upon a past of lies. Seeing Oswald with Regina, Mrs. Alving declares that she should never have withheld the truth about the captain's character. Finding out how confused Oswald's life has been since he found out that the man he considered a saint passed a venereal disease to him, she is even more remorseful about her deception. From beyond the grave, Captain Alving's sinful life appears to reach out to the one she loves more than her own life, her son, first in the form of a forbidden love and then as death.

What seems to be the ghostly force of the late captain's character, though, is actually the same fascination with "Duty and Obligation" that drove Helena Alving to the pastor's door so long ago. Her dream that she could ever, at any set time, be relieved of her responsibility to her husband, turns out to just be wishful thinking. When she tells Pastor Manders that she should give Oswald the truth, he counters that she owes her son ideals, not truth. He may be on the opposite side of the argument from her, but it is by mutual consent that his side balances hers. Before the threat of an incestuous relationship between Regina and Oswald, before the fact of Oswald's disease is known, Mrs. Alving's truth and Pastor Manders's ideals hold equal footing, if not for the audience then for the two of them.

As late as the last act, Pastor Manders's morality is still affecting her, exerting a gravitational pull. Having despised her husband when he was alive and survived ten years since his death with her hatred undiminished, she suddenly sees that she may have been responsible for the ruin of Captain Alving's life. She feels that she may have been too concerned about "duties," draining the "joy of life" from him. She is seeing that part of Pastor Manders that she has in herself. The same call to duty that she believed that she was only putting up with for a short while turns out to be deeply imbedded within her personality.

Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving have complimentary personalities, but by the time that the play begins, their roles within the dynamic of their relationship have reversed. She came to him once as a girl, offering him the adult position of responsibility, authority, and control. When she watches him falling naively for the lies that Engstrand tells him, she sees that she is much more qualified to deal with the duplicity of the real world. "I think you are, and will always be, a great baby, Manders." When she recognizes at last that she has always had the power in their relationship by realizing that his command to return to her husband was a command that she did not need to follow, she is almost giddy with her sense of freedom. She puts her hands on his shoulders, threatens to kiss him, which terrifies him, so he grabs his things and leaves. It is possibly the one true moment of their relationship, where she acts out the truth of his fear and weakness and displays her attraction to acting on one's impulses.

This attraction, which for that one moment seemed to border on sweetness, comes back as an echo a ghost in the bitter tragedy of the play's last scene. First, it is applied to the captain, who is the official ghost of the play. Mrs. Alving's delight at seeing the

pastor as a "great baby" makes more sense to audiences when she shows the same attraction to that aspect in her late husband's character, "child of joy as he was for he was like a child at that time." But when that childishness shows itself in a real person, Oswald, who is the captain's physical manifestation in the play, then the figure of her imagination turns grim.

Oswald describes the condition that his disease will leave him in even before it happens in the play. He will be "helpless, like a new-born baby, impotent, lost, hopeless, past all saving." In the play's last lines, when this state has actually descended upon him, the Alving family has come full circle. Helena, who once laid herself at the mercy of another person, grew such strength because of the pastor's rejection that she now ends up having to make the ultimate decision. She has overcome her own weakness to appreciate the weakness in others, until her own son slides back into it with the stated wish that she take his life.

Ghosts' detractors have pointed out that it is an incomplete drama, with the concluding act left to occur after the final curtain has fallen, out of view of the audience. This reading of the play assumes that knowing whether Mrs. Alving gives Oswald the poison would conclude the play. Looking at it from another angle, though, it is complete. In the end, Helena Alving, who wanted so much when she was young to give herself over to a man of morals, now has a grave moral choice in her hand. It does not matter how she acts; what matters is that the identity of the person who once said "take me" has been completely reversed by the circumstances her personality has created in her life.

Source: David Kelly, in an essay for *Drama for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

John Northam focuses on Mrs. Alving in Ghosts, *placing her in the context of the society depicted in the play. According to him, Mrs. Alving "has always been at war" with her society, which subtly coerces women to sacrifice their "personal integrity to social demands."*

The ironies compressed into [the final scene of *Ghosts}* are likely to be almost as unendurable for the audience as for Mrs. Alving. She worked so hard to create for her son a corner of health and sanity in a corrupt world; that son is mentally diseased. She planned to clear the house of all other but herself and her beloved child; she has succeeded, but only in this appalling travesty. She thought that she could bring the long, hateful comedy to a neat end, scaling off all consequences, but she has unwittingly written a final act which is tragic. She worked to preserve a life and must now decide whether to destroy it.

The sum of these reversals to her expectations amounts to a condemnation of Mrs. Alving; not for her trying, but for the mode of her trying. The essential quality in her is ambiguity, that strangely constant mingling within the one woman of radical and conformist; she is strong enough to try to think for herself, but too cowardly to act in any other way than that required by the society she has, in part, seen through. Her radicalism itself is never complete; it may, under Oswald's influence, expand, but at no point can she fully liberate herself from the influence upon her, acknowledged or unacknowledged, of dead social habits. All that can be said of her at the end of the play is that at least at that moment she is being forced to face facts as they really are; what she will make of the experience we cannot know.

Thus the play could be taken as the trial and condemnation of a misguided, inadequate woman. If Mrs. Alving had been true to her own feelings she would not have married Alving, or remained with him once married; had she been true to her own sense of the genuine, she would not have decided to rectify the disaster of her life by preserving appearances, whose falsity she recognised, in order to appease society. It is a strong indictment and the play undoubtedly levels it at her; and yet an account that stopped there would seem to me not to acknowledge much else that is offered.

For all her misguidedness, Mrs. Alving remains in the imagination as a splendid woman. This impression comes partly from her personality and character taken by and for themselves. She has been so strong, to have coped with a life like that without weakness and to have coped alone. She must have had nerves and a will of steel to have conceived and carried out a plan of such complexity and long duration without losing heart. She always fights to control and shape events, never allowing herself to be passively overwhelmed. She is indeed a strong woman. And we can only admire the direction in which her strength is constantly directed. Misguided or not, blinkered though she may be in ways unsuspected by herself, she is always trying to see through pretence and hypocrisy to the truth behind it. She often fails to get through, and she initially fails to act on the truth that she has discovered, but that is the direction her bent

of mind leads her in. And out of her private understanding she hopes for one single thing: to create the possibility of a decent life.

There is an element of selfishness in all this, yet even that is forgiveable in a mother. She wants her boy to herself. But she is no child-devourer; Oswald has always been free to come and go; but for his illness he could return to Paris; Mrs. Alving relishes the thought of his staying but she has never suggested it, still less demanded or engineered it.

The element of maternal selfishness is minor compared with the selflessness that has made her sacrifice her own happiness to her son's well-being. Everything that she has done has been directed towards that.

Thus even on a narrow view of Mrs. Alving as a character in isolation she seems to merit deep respect and not mere blame. For the full assessment we need to see her in her context.

In simple terms, Mrs. Alving has always been at war with society. Her stature, and her achievements, must be gauged in relation to her antagonist. And here the play creates a force of peculiar horror. Society is presented as an openly coercive force, but that is not its chief characteristic. We see it in action upon Manders and through him upon Mrs. Alving. The coercion is strong, certainly not negligible, but it is not remarkable.

Society's real power lies in its unobtrusiveness. The trap it lays for Mrs. Alving is one into which she and millions of other women have slipped without recognising that it was a trap. There is nothing openly coercive about the advice of relations when it comes to choosing a husband. Mrs. Alving was not aware of facing a great crisis in her life when she decided that Alving was the best catch in social terms; and yet in that choice she subdued her own feelings to the criteria created by society. The essential falsification occurred then, yet who could have identified such a crisis in so commonplace a decision? Part of the power of society in Ghosts is that it works through small-scale events which do not proclaim their real significance at the moment of occurrence. Brand could identify his crises; Mrs. Alving could not.

Yet once in, the consequences are fatal and inescapable. From the initial falsification all others flow; and these too hide their significance in unobtrusiveness. When Mrs. Alving sent Oswald away from home and made arrangements for Regine and so on, she was being false to her knowledge of the truth, but she was conditioned by society to accept without question that this was the reasonable way to act. Her plans were reasonable submissions to society that followed from her first reasonable submission. And she has gone on living for years without having much reason to recognise that such submission of personal integrity to social demands could be critical and fatal.

And yet in the end the magnitude of crisis must become clear. To submit, to the extent that Mrs. Alving has, to society is to cause terrible corruption to set in. Oswald's disease is the outward and spectacular sign of the corruption, of its secretiveness and of its fatal inevitability, but it is not the only form of corruption. There is corruption of will, corruption

of courage, corruption of integrity, of relationships indeed a creeping invasion through many different veins and arteries of the play simultaneously. In *Brand* the sequence of events was linear; Brand moved on from one crisis and its consequences to the next. In *Ghosts* the various streams of corruption move apparently independently and in unsuspected ways towards the one moment of dissolution.

Perhaps Ibsen's greatest discovery in *Ghosts* was the way in which his protagonist must necessarily be involved in modern society. Falk, in *Love's Comedy*, by virtue of his favoured status as student, was allowed to stand outside the social structure he condemned. Though affected by his antagonism to his surroundings, he was not contaminated by them. Nor was Brand; even though he was woven into his community far more intimately than Falk, his small parish can serve only as an emblem of real modern social existence; and he too, Ibsen seemed to imagine, could preserve his spiritual integrity.

Mrs. Alving cannot preserve hers entirely from the corruption she later comes to identify. However clearly she may, by the time the play begins, recognise that she married for the wrong reason, may have acted wrongly since, may need to revise and enlarge her sense of truth and honesty, she constantly reveals that society continues to influence her ways of thought and action. Ibsen can see now that no individual, not even one with the basic integrity of a Mrs. Alving, can escape permeation by the very corruption by society that their integrity makes them identify and oppose. Significantly one of the images of that permeation is the gloom which envelops, as an all-pervasive natural force, the action of so much of the play.

This is Mrs. Alving's antagonist, and it is in its peculiar fashion powerful enough to explain and justify total submissiveness in all the individuals who compose it. Mrs. Alving is conditioned; she is partly submissive, deliberately and unconsciously; but she is never totally subdued. And this refusal to give up trying to discover what is the truth and the right way to respond to it is again significantly defined through the image of a great natural force, the sun. Notwithstanding her wounds and blemishes, indeed because of them, Mrs. Alving emerges as a great fighter against a terrible opponent.

In *Ghosts*, then, Ibsen has entered more deeply into the nature of modern society and its relationship to the heroic individual; he has also created a dramatic form for embodying his vision. Whatever else it may be, *Ghosts* cannot reasonably be assessed as a mere surrender on Ibsen's part to theatrical expediency or as a betrayal of the poetic copiousness *of Love's Comedy, Brand,* and *Peer Gynt* to the seductions of naturalism. Its form is essential to the vision.

The language, for instance, is limited in range because this is one of the effects society has on its members. It educates them to think decorously and to express themselves with conventional neatness. Anyone who tries to break these limitations must create his own language and in Oswald's shapeless rhetoric the impression of overemphasis, of straining after effects not to hand in the common use of language, is indicative not of Ibsen's verbal impoverishment but of the spiritual impoverishment of the society that cannot accommodate Oswald; and, as we have seen, Mrs. Alving's reduction of his

vision to the careful patterning that she has been educated in illuminates the same point from a different angle. Ibsen can no longer imagine for his modern hero that degree of mental and spiritual autonomy that allowed Falk and Brand to be fully articulate poets. Their significance lies in their being poets of living, men with a vision of a finer life than society offers, but their ability to be poets in words, to speak out with full-blooded rhetoric to expound, explore, define their visions, is one way of asserting that they are spiritually free men. But they were so only because Ibsen had not, at that time, really sensed the power of modern society: Falk can stand outside it, Brand encounters a simplified version, an emblem. Nobody, not even Mrs. Alving, can preserve his autonomy in the face of the complexity of power that society now represents for Ibsen, and the language is one means of expressing this fact.

The same is true of the setting. Mrs. Alving's handsome room may be less spectacular than Brand's mountains and ice-church but it is not to be despised for its ordinariness. The set mirrors Ibsen's conviction that it is by its unobtrusiveness, by its very reasonableness and seemliness, that society is able to exercise its power; the very decency of appearances helps him emphasise the horror of discovering that the attractive setting is a monstrous snare, and the limiting of the action to one room takes away the illusion, still preserved in *Love's Comedy* and *Brand,* that there is somewhere else to go. In modern society, as Ibsen sees it, there is nowhere else; the great battles must be fought out amongst comfortable furniture in a handsome house; the mountains offer no escape to Mrs. Alving: they are remote images of ultimate truth, not to be trodden as they were by Falk and Brand. The setting is an essential part of Ibsen's harsher vision.

The setting is created partly by verbal, partly by visual imagery. Both kinds indicate further advances beyond the artistry and vision of his earlier works. The extremity of imagery in *Brand,* those blatant and massive symbols of opposition storm, mountains, ice-church, narrow dale, sunshine and so forth help create what amounts to an almost comforting sense of clarity. The opposed values are identified for us; the crises that arise out of the opposition are made manifest not merely to us but to the protagonist. In Ghosts everything is made less precise. Instead of storm, steady drizzle and mist, not a challenge so much as an enervating atmosphere; instead of miserable dale, Mrs. Alving's country house, outwardly a haven. There are no sharp indices of crisis; we have to discover them as Ibsen now sees them, as latent and lurking. Out of this lack of clarity comes a further virtue. Instead of establishing his imagery *ab initio* [from the beginning], as he does in *Love's Comedy* and in *Brand,* and then working by repetition, Ibsen allows his imagery to grow organically, establishing itself and its significance progressively. He works not by massive and blatant groupings but by small affinities gradually discovered. Yet he holds all this together, more successfully than in *Brand*, by creating a feeling of tempo, of inevitable movement towards a climax. All of the imagery is ultimately controlled by the image of Oswald's disease and by the image of day dispersing night. Thus Ibsen can represent deviousness and cryptic consequence without losing his sense of the essential unity of the action or of the pace in which the action moves. There is little feeling of development or progression in *Love's Comedy*, in *Brand* there is progression of a relatively simple linear kind, with little feeling of tempo; *Ghosts* moves much more impressively.

In *Ghosts* the vision is enriched and the form for its expression brought almost to perfection. Not quite to perfection because there are signs, here and there, that the effort to elucidate for himself the pattern that underlies the seemingly petty detail of modern living led him into oversimplification, both of vision and form, in the interests of clarity. Some of the cross-weaving of images into patterns is of this kind the equation of the drizzle with the spiritual climate, or of Oswald with the Orphanage, does not need the kind of emphasis it is given. Manders need not be as inadequate as he is to give a reasonable representation of society's inadequacies.

Ghosts has its imperfections but it is a great play for all that. Though different in kind it is arguably a finer dramatic poem than *Brand,* if by poem we mean an imaginatively organised structure of imagery constituting a profound and unified vision. Less debatably, Mrs. Alving is a more convincing kind of hero than Brand, by virtue of her fuller involvement in a society more fully understood and represented. From *Love's Comedy* and *Brand* we gain insight into the issues that govern the quality of living; in Ghosts the issues are played out upon our nerves and feelings as we experience, with Mrs. Alving, what it feels like to be a woman like that condemned to live in such a world. *Ghosts* is, above all, an experience, immediate and immensely painful. And yet, for all its greatness, it marks only Ibsen's entry into artistic maturity; the greatest works are amongst those that follow.

Source: John Northam, Excerpt from *Ibsen: A Critical Study,* Cambridge at the University Press, 1973, p. 237.

Critical Essay #3

Corrigan views Mrs. Alving in Ghosts *as divided between her intellectual ideals and an "emotional inheritance" over which she has no control.*

Ghosts created the biggest stir in Europe of all of Ibsen's plays. It was the hallmark of the Free Theatre movement. Antoine at the Theatre Libre, Brahm at the Freie Buehne, and Grein at the Independent Theatre in London all produced this play as a symbol and a harbinger of their freedom. But the play was violently received. It shocked respectable middle-class audiences everywhere; it was condemned and banned; for the young turks of liberalism it was a banner to be waved on high. From the beginning the play had a notoriety that Ibsen only partially intended.

Fortunately, *Ghosts* is now seen in clearer perspective and we tend to be amused by the critical reaction of the Nineties. But Ghosts is still a controversial play. The number of respectable interpretations currently making the rounds is large and when you get on the subject of *Ghosts* as tragedy well, it is one of those plays, like [Arthur Miller's] *Death of a Salesman,* it just won't stay settled and is always good for an argument. The four major interpretations of the play usually advanced are: First, Ibsen wrote *Ghosts* as an answer to the objections raised by Nora's flight from her husband and children in *A Doll's House*. Tied to a worse husband than Helmar, Mrs. Alving, instead of leaving him, had decided to stay, and to cover up the "corpse" of her married life with respectable trappings. Second: Mrs. Alving and Oswald are the victims of a two-fisted fate which takes the form of the laws of heredity in a mechanistic world and the stultifying and debilitating conventions of respectability. Third: Hereditary disease was for Ibsen the symbol of all the determinist forces that crush humanity, and, therefore, he sought to put in opposition to these forces the strongest of all instincts maternal passion. And, finally, there is a fourth group of critics who dismiss the play as irrelevant except as an historical landmark. They argue that although the play may have been revolutionary in its day, today any dramatic conflict which presents suffering and a shot of penicillin as its alternatives is not very convincing. All of these interpretations and they have been persuasively argued by responsible critics seem to me to be either misreadings of the play or beside the point. They are comments about the play, but they are ancillary and fail to recognize the underlying conflict of the play. For this reason most modern commentaries on *Ghosts* fail to describe and interpret the central action which Ibsen is imitating, and this has resulted in many limited or erroneous discussions of the play as a tragedy. It is this central action and its tragic implications which I wish to discuss, and this can best be done by first turning to Ibsen the man and the artist.

Ibsen's biography is a study in conflict and contradiction. The gadfly of bourgeoisie morality was helplessly bourgeois; the enemy of pietism was a guilt-ridden possessor of the worst kind of "Lutheran " conscience; the champion of the "love-life of the soul" was incapable of loving; the militant spokesman against hypocrisy and respectability was pompous and outraged at any breach of decorum. Ibsen's life is the contradiction of those values affirmed in his plays. This should not confuse us, however, if we will look even briefly at some of the significant events in a life that was really quite dull....

In short, Ibsen became a "pillar of society" in his last days; he was a regular speaker at the Norwegian equivalents of the Rotary Club, the AAUW, Labor Unions, and the Better Business Bureau. In his speeches he praised all of these groups and gratefully accepted their adulation and honors. His study walls were covered with plaques and certificates from civic organizations and only a bust of [August] Strindberg a bust that captured the penetrating and demonic quality of Strindberg's gaze acted as an antidote to this display of middle-class self-righteousness. On March 15th, 1900 Ibsen had a stroke, and another in the following year. These paralytic strokes were followed by amnesia and for six years he lay helplessly senile. He died on May 23rd, 1906, at the age of seventy-eight.

The clue to the meaning of all Ibsen's plays lies in this strange biography. Ibsen's plays are a continuous act of expiation. Certainly, it is significant that bankruptcy and the resultant rejection by society appears in four of his plays; the desire to restore the family honor is central to two more; and there are illegitimate children in eight plays. Thematically, the plays are, almost without exception, patterned in a similar way: a hidden moral guilt and the fear of impending retribution. Structurally, the plays are epilogues of retribution. All of the plays after *Peer Gynt*, begin on a happy note late in the action. In each case the central figure has a secret guilt which is soon discovered. As the play progresses, by series of expository scenes (scenes which delve into the past and are then related to the present condition of the characters), a sense of the foreboding doom of impending retribution envelops the action and each of the plays ends with justice, in the form of moral fate having its way. And finally, beginning with *Ghosts,* Ibsen introduces the theme of expiation. In every play following *Ghosts,* at least one of the central characters feels the need to exorcise his guilt, doubt, or fear by some form of renunciation.

Perhaps more important is the fact, that as Ibsen's art developed these themes and attitudes changed in tone and form. The guilt, which had been specific in the early days Bernick's lie [in *The Pillars of Society}*, Nora's forgery [in *A Doll's House}*, Mrs. Alving's return becomes more and more abstract, nebulous, and ominous as best evidenced in the nameless guilt of Solness [in *The Master Builder*} and Rosmer [in *Rosmersholm}*. The fear, which in the early plays had been the fear of discovery, becomes a gnawing anxiety. Self-realization, which in *Brand* is presented in terms of the Kierkegaardian imperative of either/or is realized in the later plays in an ambiguous kind of self-destruction. And finally, significant action on the part of the characters has tendencies towards becoming a frozen stasis of meaningless activity and contemplation.

Ibsen's life and his work are closely interwoven. Ibsen, rejected from society as a young man, had good reason to see the blindness of bourgeois respectability in his exile. And yet his sharp criticism of society is always balanced by his desire to be a part of that very society he saw and knew to be false. Over and over again in his plays and letters he condemns the hypocrisy, the intellectual shallow-ness, and the grim bleakness of his Scandinavian homeland. But he returned to it in pomp and circumstance. Herein lies the crux to an understanding of Ibsen's art in general and *Ghosts* in particular. More and more we see that both in Ibsen the man and in the characters of his plays the basic struggle is within.

Ibsen lived in a time of revolution; he was a maker of part of that revolution; and he knew full well that all the things he said about bourgeois society were true. But despite his rational understanding, his intellectual comprehension of this fact, he was driven by deeper forces within him not only to justify himself to that false society, but to become apart of it. It is this struggle within himself between his rational powers and the Trolls of the Boyg that best explains his life and work. Ibsen's plays are his attempts to quell the guilt he felt for desiring values which he knew to be false. In support of this point, I call attention to two important bits of evidence: the first is a letter written by Ibsen to Peter Hanson in 1870:

While writing *Brand*, I had on my desk a glass with a scorpion in it. From time to time the little animal was ill. Then I used to give it a piece of soft fruit, upon which it fell furiously and emptied its poison into it after which it was well again. Does not something similar happen to us poets? The laws of nature regulate the spiritual world also....

The second is a short poem entitled "Fear of Light" (presently, I shall relate the significance of that title to Ghosts):

What is life? a fighting

In heart and brain with Trolls.

Poetry? that means writing

Doomsday-accounts of our souls.

I contend that Ibsen's plays were attempts attempts that were bound to fail, just as Mrs. Alving' s attempts were bound to fail to relieve Ibsen of his guilt and at the same time were judgments of his failure to overcome the Trolls (which first appear as Gerd in *Brand)*, those irrational forces and powers within man over which he has no control.

Keeping these facts in mind, let us now turn to *Ghosts*. One does not have to be a very perceptive student of the theatre to realize that the "ghosts" Ibsen is talking about are those ghosts of the past that haunt us in the present. In fact, Ibsen has often been criticized for using his ghost symbolism with such obviousness, such lack of subtlety, and so repetitiously. Certainly, when reading the play we feel this criticism is justified. Oswald's looking like Captain Alving; his interest in sex and liquor; his feelings toward Regina; his syphilitic inheritance; Pastor Mander's influence over Mrs. Alving, the orphanage, and the fire are only a few of the "ghosts" that Ibsen uses as analogues to his theme. Alrik Gustafson puts it this way [in "Some Notes on Themes, Character, and Symbol in *Rosmersholm," Carleton Drama Review* I, No. 2]:

Symbols are, of course, a commonplace in Ibsen's dramas, but in his early plays before *The Wild Duck* he uses symbolistic devices somewhat too obviously, almost exclusively to clarify his themes. Any college sophomore can tell you after a single reading of *Pillars of Society, A Doll's House*, or *Ghosts* what the symbols expressed in these titles mean. The symbols convey *ideas* and little else. They have few emotional overtones, are invested with little of the impressive mystery of life, the tragic poetry of existence. They

tend to leave us in consequence cold, uncommitted, like after a debate whose heavy-handed dialectic has ignored the very pulse-beat of a life form which it is supposed to have championed.

But Ghosts is concerned with more than the external manifestations of an evil heritage. In those oft-quoted lines that serve as a rationale for the play, Mrs. Alving says:

I am half inclined to think we are all ghosts, Mr. Manders. It is not only what we have inherited from our fathers and mothers that exists again in us, but all sorts of old dead ideas and all kinds of old dead beliefs and things of that kind. They are not actually alive in us; but there they are dormant, all the same, and we can never be rid of them.... There must be ghosts all over the world.... And we are so miserably afraid of the light, all of us ... and I am here, fighting with ghosts both without and within me.

The *ghosts* of plot and symbol are the manifestations of Mrs. Alving's struggle with the ghosts within. It is this internal conflict, a conflict similar to Ibsen's personal struggle, that is the play's central action.

To define this action more explicitly, I would say that Ibsen is imitating an action in which a woman of ability and stature finds her ideals and her intellectual attitudes and beliefs in conflict with an inherited emotional life determined by the habitual responses of respectability and convention. As the play's form evolves it becomes apparent that the values Mrs. Alving affirms in intellectual terms are doomed to defeat because she has no control over her emotional inheritance an inheritance of ghosts which exists, but which cannot be confined to or controlled by any schematization of the intelligence.

Every significant choice that Mrs. Alving has ever made and the resultant action of such a decision is determined by these ghosts of the past rather than by intellectual deliberation. To mention but a few instances: Her marriage to Captain Alving in conformity to the wishes of her mother and aunts; her return to her husband; her reaction to the Oswald-Regina relationship; her acceptance of Manders after she has seen and commented upon the hypocrisy of the scene with Engstrand; her failure to tell Oswald the "straight" truth about his father; the horror of her reaction when Oswald is indifferent to his father's life; and finally, the question mark with which the play ends. All of these scenes are evidence that Mrs. Alving's ideals of freedom and her rhetorical flights into intellectual honesty are of no use to her when it comes to action. Perhaps, I can make my point more clear by briefly developing two of the above mentioned episodes.

As the second act opens, Mrs. Alving comes to a quick decision about Oswald's relationship with Regina: "Out of the house she shall go and at once. That part of it is clear as daylight." I will return to the relationship of light to enlightenment, but for the moment we see that Mrs. Alving's decision is based upon an emotional response determined by her inheritance of respectability. Then, Mrs. Alving and the pastor begin to talk; and Mrs. Alving always talks a good game. After better than four pages of dialogue, Mrs. Alving is finally able to exclaim: "If I were not such a miserable coward, I would say to him: 'Marry her, or make any arrangement you like with her only let there

be no deceit in the matter.'" The pastor is properly shocked when Mrs. Alving gives him the "face the facts of life" routine; but her liberation, which is only verbal, is short lived! Manders asks how "you, a mother, can be willing to allow your ..." This is Mrs. Alving's reply: "But I am not willing to allow it. I would not allow it for anything in the world; that is just what I was saying."

Or to take another situation. In Act I, Mrs. Alving tells Manders what her husband was really like: "The truth is this, that my husband died just as great a profligate as he had been all his life." In Act II, she is telling Manders of all the things she ought to have done and she says: "If I had been the woman I ought, I would have taken Oswald into my confidence and said to him: 'Listen, my son, your father was a dissolute man.'" In the third act circumstances have forced Mrs. Alving to tell Oswald the truth about his father: "Your poor father never found any outlet for the overmastering joy of life that was in him. And I brought no holiday spirit into his house, either; I am afraid I made your poor father's home unbearable to him, Oswald."

When we come to see the big scenes in this way, we then recall the numerous small events that create the network of the action and give the play its texture. Such things come to mind as Mrs. Alving's need of books to make her feel secure in her stand, and the neat little bit in the first act where Mrs. Alving reprimands Oswald for smoking in the parlor, which Ibsen then underscores by making it an issue in the second act.

Ibsen's plays are filled with such incidents; those little events that tell so much. I am of the persuasion that Ibsen is not very good at making big events happen; as appealing as they may be to a director, they tend to be theatrically inflated; they are melodramatic in the sense that the action of the plot is in itself larger than the characters or the situation in the play which create such events. Ibsen is the master of creating the small shocking event, or as Mary McCarthy puts it: "the psychopathology of everyday life." Nora's pushing off the sewing on the widow Christine [in *A Doll's House*]', Hjalmer letting Hedwig do the retouching with her half-blind eyes as he goes off hunting in the attic; his cutting of his father at Werle' s party [in *The Wild Duck]*; and the moment when Hedda intentionally mistakes Aunt Julia's new hat for the servant's [in *Hedda Gabler]*, are all examples of this talent. These are the things we know we are capable of! This is the success (and the limitation) of the naturalistic convention "which implies a norm of behavior on the part of its guilty citizens within their box-like living rooms."

But to return to the main business at hand: the conflict for Mrs. Alving, then, is not how to act. She just acts; there is no decision, nor can there be, for she has no rational control over her actions. Herein lies the conflict. Just because Mrs. Alving has no control over her actions, does not mean she escapes the feelings of guilt for what she does and her inability to do otherwise. Her continual rhetoricizing about emancipation and her many acts of renunciation are attempts to satisfy these feelings of guilt. For example, and I am indebted to Wiegand here [Hermann Weigand, *The Modem Ibsen, 1925*], the explicit reasons she gives for building the orphanage do not account sufficiently for her use of the expression, "the power of an uneasy conscience." There is a big difference between fear that an ugly secret will become known and an evil conscience. Mrs. Alving's sense of guilt is the result of an intellectual emancipation from the habits of a

lifetime; it is an emancipation from those values which she emotionally still accepts. It is precisely for this reason that her attempts at expiation are never satisfactory they are not central to and part of her guilt.

To put it another way, Mrs. Alving's image of herself as liberated from outworn ideas is at odds with what in fact she is, a middle-aged woman bound by the chains of respectability and convention. It is for this reason, in a way similar to [Jean-Paul] Sartre's characters in the hell of *No Exit,* that she suffers. She is aware of the disparity between image and fact: "I ought" is a choric refrain that runs through her conversation; and she constantly looks for ways to affirm her image and assuage her guilt. And yet, the very fact that she accepts the image of herself as free, when experience has proven otherwise time and time again, explains why she is defeated in every attempt at atonement.

The sun finally rises. Ibsen has been preparing for this from the beginning. As the past is gradually revealed in the play and as the issues of the action come into sharper focus, "light" becomes more and more important in Ibsen's design. The play opens in the gloom of evening and rain; Mrs. Alving, at least according to Ibsen's stage directions, plays most of her important revelation scenes at the window, the source of light; as Mrs. Alving decides to quell Oswald's "gnawing doubts," she calls for a light; Oswald's big speech about the "joy and openness of life" uses the sun as its central metaphor; the light that reveals tells the truth how impossible it is for Mrs. Alving to atone for her guilt has its source in the flames of the burning orphanage; and, finally, it is the sun, the source of all light, that reveals the meaning of the play's completed action. Mr. Alving is still trapped within the net of her own inheritance. She, as she has already told us and as Ibsen tells us in his poem, "Fear of Light," is afraid to face the real truth about herself. This fear is something over which she has no control.

If we can empathize with Mrs. Alving, and I think we can, we have been lead to feel, as she believes, that as the light comes out of darkness, as the pressures of reality impinge upon her with unrelenting force, she will be capable of an act of freedom. We want to believe that she will affirm the image that she has of herself as a liberated human being by an action that is expressive of that freedom, even if that action is the murder of her own son. We want to feel that the light and heat of the sun will have the power to cauterize the ghosts of her soul. But if we have been attentive to the developing action, if we but recall what events followed the "lesser lights;" then we realize that there can be no resolution. Mrs. Alving can give only one answer, "No!"

Mrs. Alving, like Oswald, who is the most important visible symbol of the ghosts, is a victim of something over which she has no control. We are reminded of Oswald's famous speech in the second act: "My whole life incurably ruined just because of my own imprudence. . . . Oh! if only I could live my life over again if only I could undo what I have done! If only it had been something I had inherited something I could not help." We have known all along that Oswald is a victim, so Ibsen is telling us for a purpose. The reason, as a study of his other plays will attest, is that for Ibsen the external is always the mirrored reflection of what's within. Mrs. Alving is also a victim! Like Oswald, she is doomed just by being born. And since she never comes to understand herself; since

she never realizes and accepts the disparity of her image of herself and the truth about herself, she can never in a way that Oedipus, a similar kind of victim, can resolve the conflict.

For Mrs. Alving the sun has risen and just as she cannot give Oswald the sun, so the light of the sun has not been able to enlighten her. This, I believe is the conflict in the play and the developed meanings of this conflict form the play's central action.

But is this action tragic? How, if at all, is *Ghosts* a tragedy? It seems to me that there are two possible answers to these questions and the answer will depend largely on which interpretation of the play one accepts. The prevelant interpretation is the one which claims that this is a play of social protest and reform. The adherents of such a view can gather together a great deal of evidence in support of their case: all of Ibsen's plays from *League of Youth* to *The Wild Duck*; passages from the play themselves, like Oswald's speech on the freedom of Europe; numerous of Ibsen's public speeches, and several of his letters. With this interpretation the play is saying that if man would only see how hypocritical and outmoded his values were then the disasters that occur in the play need never have taken place. This view has as its fundamental premise that social evils can be cured and that when they are man is capable of living with a "joy of life." But if this is true, if all you have to do is be honest with yourself and such a view assumes this is possible and if men would see the falseness of social conventions and change them, then it seems to me the eternal elements of tragedy are dissolved in the possibility of social reform. Tragedy is concerned with showing those destructive conflicts within man that exist because man is a man no matter what age he may happen to be a part of, and no matter what kind of a society he may live in. John Gassner puts it this way [in *The Theatre in Our Times*, 1954]:

Tragedy requires an awareness of "life's impossibilities," of limitations imposed upon man by the nature of things and by the nature of man, which cannot be poetically dissolved by sentiment or "reformed" out of existence.

In some ways, I think Ibsen did intend *Ghosts* to be a play of social reform, but if this is the case, he created more than he planned. In all of his early plays, the plays we think of as the social reform plays, Ibsen is much like Mrs. Alving; he believed intellectually in freedom and wrote and talked a good deal about it, but is this the whole story? The disassociation of the ideals men live by and the facts of their living is a central theme in Ibsen's work, but it is interesting to note that even in *Ghosts* the possibility of the "happy illusion" is presented. It is a hint that Ibsen is coming to feel that the conflict between truth and ideals can never be reconciled. By the time of *Rosmersholm,* even the free souls are tainted, the reformers are corrupt, and the man trying to redeem himself is shown to be capable only of realizing that he cannot be redeemed. Rosmer's death is an act of expiation, but suicide is decided upon only after Rosmer discovers the impossibility of redemption within society by means of freer and more honest views and relations.

Thus, while it is true that Ibsen, both in his public pronouncements and in his plays prior to *Ghosts*, gives us evidence that he believes optimistically in the possibility of social

reform; that he believes that finally the sun will rise and continue to shine if man works long and diligently at facing the truth, I wonder if Ibsen is in fact whistling as he walks in the night through a graveyard. I wonder if Ibsen, even as early as *Ghosts,* isn't being a Mrs. Alving. Certainly this passage from a letter written during the composition of *Ghosts* permits us to wonder:

The work of writing this play has been to me like a bath which I have felt to leave cleaner, healthier, and freer. Who is the man among us who has not now and then felt and acknowledged within himself a contradiction between word and action, between will and task, between life and teaching on the whole? Or who is there among us who has not selfishly been sufficient unto himself, and half unconsciously, half in good faith, has extenuated this conduct both to others and to himself?

The alternative interpretation of *Ghosts* is the one which I have outlined in this essay. Mrs. Alving is a victim in a conflict over which she has no control. What are the implications of such a view to tragedy?

In 1869 Ibsen wrote a significant letter to the critic George Brandes. In this letter he says:

There is without doubt a great chasm opened between yesterday and today. We must continually fight a war to the knife between these epochs.

What Ibsen meant in this letter was that to live in the modern world is to be, in many important ways, different from anyone who ever lived before. Now this doesn't mean that man has changed; human nature is still the same, but Ibsen felt that the modern way of looking at man had changed in a way that was significantly new.

Joseph Wood Krutch pursues this problem in his recent book,' *'Modernism" in the Modern Drama.* Krutch develops his argument by pointing out that since Greek times the Aristotelian dictum that "man is a reasoning animal" had been pretty universally accepted. This view did not deny man's irrationality, but it did assert that reason is the most significant human characteristic. Man is not viewed as pre-eminently a creature of instincts, passions, habits, or conditioned reflexes; rather, man is a creature who differs from the other animals precisely in the fact that rationality is his dominant mode.

The modern view assumes the opposite premise. In this view men are not sane or insane. Psychology has dissolved such sharp distinctions; we know that normal people aren't as rational as they seem and that abnormal people don't act in a random and unintelligible way. In short, the dramatist of our age has had to face the assumption that the rational is relatively unimportant; that the irrational is the dominant mode of life; and that the artist must realize, therefore, that the richest and most significant aspects of human experience are to be found in the hidden depths of the irrational. "Man tends to become less a creature of reason than the victim of obsessions, fixations, delusions, and perversions." [Krutch].

It is this premise that all of the great dramatists at the end of the 19th century, beginning with Ibsen, had to face. How is one to live in an irrational world? How is one to give

meaning to life in a world where you don't know the rules? How are human relationships to be meaningfully maintained when you can't be sure of your feelings and when your feelings can change without your knowing it? Ibsen's plays, beginning with *Ghosts*, dramatize man destroyed by trying to live rationally in such a world. But to accept irreconcilable conflict as the central fact of all life; to make dissonance rather than the harmony of reconciliation the condition of the universe is to accept as a premise a view of life which leads in drama, as in life, to a world in which men and women, heroes and heroines, become victims in a disordered world which they have not created and which they have no moral obligation to correct.

It is this process, which began in the drama when Ibsen came to see man as a victim of irrational powers, of the Trolls, over which he has no control, that leads to the sense of futility that so completely dominates a great deal of modern drama. This is the kind of futility that is expressed in our text from Ecclesiastes (as it is in Hemingway's novel); but is this sense of futility generative of what we traditionally associate with tragedy?

The traditional forms of tragedy have been affirming in the sense that they celebrated man's ability to achieve wisdom through suffering. Such tragedy saw man as a victim, to be sure, but it also saw man as having those heroic qualities and potentialities which permitted him to endure his suffering and be significantly enlightened by them in such a way that victory was realized even in defeat.

The central conflict of *Ghosts* is not peculiar to the modern world. The disassociation of fact and value is a common theme in all tragedy. But there is a significant difference when this theme is used before Ibsen. Traditional tragedy celebrates the fact that, although most of us are incapable of it, the values men wish to live by can, if only for a moment, be realized through the actions of the tragic hero. It celebrates the fact that man's capacity for greatness is often expressed in the committing of an action which is horrifying and ought not to happen and yet which must happen. In this way the possibility that man's actions and his values can be in harmony is realized. This is the affirmation of tragedy; this is the meaning of the sun that resolves so many traditional tragedies. In this kind of tragedy the hero goes through the "dark night of the soul" with all its pain, suffering, doubt, and despair; but man is viewed as one responsible for and capable of action, even if that action is a grasping for the sun. Because of this fundamental difference in view, in traditional tragedy the dark night passes away and the sun also rises on the rebirth and affirmation of a new day.

This sunrise of traditional tragedy, which celebrates the "joy and meaning of life," is not the sunrise of futility. It is not the sunrise which sheds its rays as an ironic and bitter joke on a demented boy asking his equally helpless mother: "Mother, give me the sun, The sun the sun!"

Perhaps Mrs. Alving is more tragic than Oedipus, Hamlet, or Lear; but if she is, her tragedy must be evaluated by new canons of judgment; for she differs from her predecessors in kind and not degree.

Source: Robert W. Corrigan, "The Sun Always Rises: Ibsen's *Ghosts* as Tragedy?" in *Educational Theatre Journal,* Vol. XI, No. 3, October, 1959, pp. 171-80.

Critical Essay #4

In his discussion of Ghosts, Fergusson detects elements of three conflicting types of drama in the work: a formulaic "well-made" thriller, a realist "thesis play" about a specific social question, and a traditional tragedy.

The Plot of Ghosts: Thesis, Thriller, and Tragedy

Ghosts is not Ibsen's best play, but it serves my purpose, which is to study the foundations of modern realism, just because of its imperfections. Its power, and the poetry of some of its effects, are evident; yet a contemporary audience may be bored with its old-fashioned iconoclasm and offended by the clatter of its too-obviously well-made plot. On the surface it is a *drame a these* [thesis play], of the kind [Eugene] Brieux was to develop to its logical conclusion twenty years later: it proves the hollow-ness of the conventional bourgeois marriage. At the same time it is a thriller with all the tricks of the Boulevard entertainment: Ibsen was a student of Scribe in his middle period [Augustin Eugene Scribe was the originator of the "well-made play"]. But underneath this superficial form of thesis-thriller the play which Ibsen started to write, the angry diatribe as he first conceived it there is another form, the shape of the underlying action, which Ibsen gradually made out in the course of his two-years' labor upon the play, in obedience to his scruple of truthfulness, his profound attention to the reality of his fictive characters' lives. The form of the play is understood according to two conceptions of plot, which Ibsen himself did not at this point clearly distinguish: the rationalized concatenation of events with a univocal moral, and the plot as the "soul" or first actualization of the directly perceived action.

Halvdahn Khot, in his excellent study *Henrik Ibsen*, has explained the circumstances under which *Ghosts* was written. It was first planned as an attack upon marriage, in answer to the critics of A *Doll's House*. The story of the play is perfectly coherent as the demonstration and illustration of this thesis. When the play opens, Captain Alving has just died, his son Oswald is back from Paris where he had been studying painting, and his wife is straightening out the estate. The Captain had been accepted locally as a pillar of society but was in secret a drunkard and debauchee. He had seduced his wife's maid, and had a child by her; and this child, Regina, is now in her turn Mrs. Alving's maid. Mrs. Alving had concealed all this for something like twenty years. She was following the advice of the conventional Pastor Manders and endeavoring to save Oswald from the horrors of the household: it was for this reason she had sent him away to school. But now, with her husband's death, she proposes to get rid of the Alving heritage in all its forms, in order to free herself and Oswald for the innocent, unconventional "joy of life." She wants to endow an orphanage with the Captain's money, both to quiet any rumors there may be of his sinful life and to get rid of the remains of his power over her. She encounters this power, however, in many forms, through the Pastor's timidity and through the attempt by Engstrand (a local carpenter who was bribed to pretend to be Regina's father) to blackmail her. Oswald wants to marry Regina and has to be told the whole story. At last he reveals that he has inherited syphilis from his father the dead hand of the past in its most sensationally ugly form and

when his brain softens at the end, Mrs. Alving's whole plan collapses in unrelieved horror. It is "proved" that she should have left home twenty years before, like Nora in *A Doll's House',* and that conventional marriage is therefore an evil tyranny.

In accordance with the principles of the thesis play, *Ghosts* is plotted as a series of debates on conventional morality, between Mrs. Alving and the Pastor, the Pastor and Oswald, and Oswald and his mother. It may also be read as a perfect well-made thriller. The story is presented with immediate clarity, with mounting and controlled suspense; each act ends with an exciting curtain which reaffirms the issues and promises important new developments. In this play, as in so many others, one may observe that the conception of dramatic form underlying the thesis play and the machine-made Boulevard entertainment is the same: the logically concatenated series of events (intriguing thesis or logical intrigue) which the characters and their relationships merely illustrate. And it was this view of *Ghosts* which made it an immediate scandal and success.

But Ibsen himself protested that he was not a reformer but a poet. He was often led to write by anger and he compared the process of composition to his pet scorpion's emptying of poison; Ibsen kept a piece of soft fruit in his cage for the scorpion to sting when the spirit moved him. But Ibsen's own spirit was not satisfied by the mere discharge of venom; and one may see, in *Ghosts*, behind the surfaces of the savage story, a partially realized tragic form of really poetic scope, the result of Ibsen's more serious and disinterested brooding upon the human condition in general, where it underlies the myopic rebellions and empty cliches of the time.

In order to see the tragedy behind the thesis, it is necessary to [turn] to the distinction between plot and action, and to the distinction between the plot as the rationalized series of events, and the plot as "the soul of the tragedy." The action of the play is "to control the Alving heritage for my own life." Most of the characters want some material or social advantage from it Engstrand money, for instance, and the Pastor the security of conventional respectability. But Mrs. Alving is seeking a true and free human life itself for her son, and through him, for herself. Mrs. Alving sometimes puts this quest in terms of the iconoclasms of the time, but her spiritual life, as Ibsen gradually discovered it, is at a deeper level; she tests everything Oswald, the Pastor, Regina, her own moves in the light of her extremely strict if unsophisticated moral sensibility: by direct perception and not by ideas at all. She is tragically seeking; she suffers a series of pathoses and new insights in the course of the play; and this rhythm of will, feeling, and insight underneath the machinery of the plot is the form of the life of the play, the soul of the tragedy.

The similarity between *Ghosts* and Greek tragedy, with its single fated action moving to an unmistakable catastrophe, has been felt by many critics of Ibsen. Mrs. Alving, like Oedipus, is engaged in a quest for her true human condition; and Ibsen, like Sophocles, shows on-stage only the end of this quest, when the past is being brought up again in the light of the present action and its fated outcome. From this point of view Ibsen is a plot-maker in the first sense: by means of his selection and arrangement of incidents he defines an action underlying many particular events and realized in various modes of

intelligible purpose, of suffering, and of new insight. What Mrs. Alving sees changes in the course of the play, just as what Oedipus sees changes as one veil after another is removed from the past and the present. The underlying form of *Ghosts* is that of the tragic rhythm as one finds it in [Sophocles's] *Oedipus Rex.*

But this judgment needs to be qualified in several respects: because of the theater for which Ibsen wrote, the tragic form which Sophocles could develop to the full, and with every theatrical resource, is hidden beneath the cliches of plot and the surfaces "evident to the most commonplace mind." At the end of the play the tragic rhythm of Mrs. Alving's quest is not so much completed as brutally truncated, in obedience to the requirements of the thesis and the thriller. Oswald's collapse, before our eyes, with his mother's screaming, makes the intrigue end with a bang, and hammers home the thesis. But from the point of view of Mrs. Alving's tragic quest as we have seen it develop through the rest of the play, this conclusion concludes nothing: it is merely sensational.

The exciting intrigue and the brilliantly, the violently clear surfaces of *Ghosts* are likely to obscure completely its real life and underlying form. The tragic rhythm, which Ibsen rediscovered by his long and loving attention to the reality of his fictive lives, is evident only to the histrionic sensibility. As Henry James put it, Ibsen's characters "have the extraordinary, the brilliant property of becoming when represented at once more abstract and more living": i.e., both their lives and the life of the play, the spiritual content and the form of the whole, are revealed in this medium. A Nazimova, a Duse, could show it to us on the stage. Lacking such a performance, the reader must endeavor to respond imaginatively and directly himself if he is to see the hidden poetry of Ghosts.

Mrs. Alving and Oswald: The Tragic Rhythm in a Small Figure

As Ibsen was fighting to present his poetic vision within the narrow theater admitted by modern realism, so his protagonist Mrs. Alving is fighting to realize her sense of human life in the blank photograph of her own stuffy parlor. She discovers there no means, no terms, and no nourishment; that is the truncated tragedy which underlies the savage thesis of the play. But she does find her son Oswald, and she makes of him the symbol of all she is seeking: freedom, innocence, joy, and truth. At the level of the life of the play, where Ibsen warms his characters into extraordinary human reality, they all have moral and emotional meanings for each other; and the pattern of their related actions, their partially blind struggle for the Alving heritage, is consistent and very complex. In this structure, Mrs. Alving's changing relation to Oswald is only one strand, though an important one. I wish to consider it as a sample of Ibsen's rediscovery, through modern realism, of the tragic rhythm.

Oswald is of course not only a symbol for his mother, but a person in his own right, with his own quest for freedom and release, and his own anomalous stake in the Alving heritage. He is also a symbol for Pastor Manders of what he wants from Captain Alving's estate: the stability and continuity of the bourgeois conventions. In the economy of the play as a whole, Oswald is the hidden reality of the whole situation, like Oedipus' actual status as son-husband: the hidden fatality which, revealed in a series of tragic

and ironic steps, brings the final peripety [reversal] of the action. To see how this works, the reader is asked to consider Oswald's role in Act I and the beginning of Act II.

The main part of Act I (after a prologue between Regina and Engstrand) is a debate, or rather agon [conflict], between Mrs. Alving and the Pastor. The Pastor has come to settle the details of Mrs. Alving's bequest of her husband's money to the orphanage. They at once disagree about the purpose and handling of the bequest; and this disagreement soon broadens into the whole issue of Mrs. Alving's emancipation versus the Pastor's conventionality. The question of Oswald is at the center. The Pastor wants to think of him, and to make of him, a pillar of society such as the Captain was supposed to have been, while Mrs. Alving wants him to be her masterpiece of liberation. At this point Oswald himself wanders in, the actual but still mysterious truth underlying the dispute between his mother and the Pastor. His appearance produces what the Greeks would have called a complex recognition scene, with an implied peripety for both Mrs. Alving and the Pastor, which will not be realized by them until the end of the act. But this tragic development is written to be acted; it is to be found, not so much in the actual words of the characters, as in their moral-emotional responses and changing relationships to one another.

The Pastor has not seen Oswald since he grew up; and seeing him now he is startled as though by a real ghost; he recognizes him as the very reincarnation of his father: the same physique, the same mannerisms, even the same kind of pipe. Mrs. Alving with equal confidence recognizes him as her own son, and she notes that his mouth-mannerism is like the Pastor's. (She had been in love with the Pastor during the early years of her marriage, when she wanted to leave the Captain.) As for Oswald himself, the mention of the pipe gives him a Proustian intermittence of the heart: he suddenly recalls a childhood scene when his father had given him his own pipe to smoke. He feels again the nausea and the cold sweat, and hears the Captain's hearty laughter. Thus in effect he recognizes himself as his father's, in the sense of his father's victim; a premonition of the ugly scene at the end of the play. But at this point no one is prepared to accept the full import of these insights. The whole scene is, on the surface, light and conventional, an accurate report of a passage of provincial politeness. Oswald wanders off for a walk before dinner, and the Pastor and his mother are left to bring their struggle more into the open.

Oswald's brief scene marks the end of the first round of the fight, and serves as prologue for the second round, much as the intervention of the chorus in the agon between Oedipus and Tiresias punctuates their struggle, and hints at an unexpected outcome on a new level of awareness. As soon as Oswald has gone, the Pastor launches an attack in form upon Mrs. Alving's entire emancipated way of life, with the question of Oswald, his role in the community, his upbringing and his future, always at the center of the attack. Mrs. Alving replies with her whole rebellious philosophy, illustrated by a detailed account of her tormented life with the Captain, none of which the Pastor had known (or been willing to recognize) before. Mrs. Alving proves on the basis of this evidence that her new freedom is right; that her long secret rebellion was justified; and that she is now about to complete Oswald's emancipation, and thereby her own, from the swarming ghosts of the past. If the issue were merely on this rationalistic

level, and between her and the Pastor, she would triumph at this point. But the real truth of her situation (as Oswald's appearance led us to suppose) does not fit either her rationalization or the Pastor's.

Oswald passes through the parlor again on his way to the dining room to get a drink before dinner, and his mother watches him in pride and pleasure. But from behind the door we hear the affected squealing of Regina. It is now Mrs. Alving's turn for an intermittence of the heart: it is as though she heard again her husband with Regina's mother. The insight which she had rejected before now reaches her in full strength, bringing the promised pathos and peripety; she sees Oswald, not as her masterpiece of liberation, but as the sinister, tyrannical, and continuing life of the past itself. The basis of her rationalization is gone; she suffers the breakdown of the moral being which she had built upon her now exploded view of Oswald.

At this point Ibsen brings down the curtain in obedience to the principles of the well-made play. The effect is to raise the suspense by stimulating our curiosity about the facts of the rest of the story. What will Mrs. Alving do now? What will the Pastor do for Oswald and Regina are half-brother and sister; can we prevent the scandal from coming out? So the suspense is raised, but the attention of the audience is diverted from Mrs. Alving's tragic quest to the most literal, newspaper version of the facts.

The second act (which occurs immediately after dinner) is ostensibly concerned only with these gossipy facts. The Pastor and Mrs. Alving debate ways of handling the threatened scandal. But this is only the literal surface: Ibsen has his eye upon Mrs. Alving's shaken psyche, and the actual dramatic form of this scene, under the discussion which Mrs. Alving keeps up, is her pathos which the Act I curtain broke off. Mrs. Alving is suffering the blow in courage and faith; and she is rewarded with her deepest insight: "I am half inclined to think we are all ghosts, Mr. Manders. It is not only what we have inherited from our fathers and mothers that exists again in us, but all sorts of dead ideas and all kinds of old dead beliefs and things of that kind. They are not actually alive in us; but they are dormant all the same, and we can never be rid of them. Whenever I take up a newspaper and read it, I fancy I see ghosts creeping between the lines. There must be ghosts all over the world. They must be as countless as the grains of sand, it seems to me. And we are so miserably afraid of the light, all of us." This passage, in the fumbling phrases of Ibsen's provincial lady, and in William Archer's translation, is not by itself the poetry of the great dramatic poets. It does not have the verbal music of [Jean] Racine, nor the freedom and sophistication of Hamlet, nor the scope of the Sophoclean chorus, with its use of the full complement of poetic and musical and theatrical resources. But in the total situation in the Alving parlor which Ibsen has so carefully established, and in terms of Mrs. Alving's uninstructed but profoundly developing awareness, it has its own hidden poetry: a poetry not of words but of the theater, a poetry of the histrionic sensibility. From the point of view of the underlying form of the play the form as "the soul" of the tragedy this scene completes the sequence which began with the debate in Act I: it is the pathos-and-epiphany following that agon.

It is evident, I think, that insofar as Ibsen was able to obey his realistic scruple, his need for the disinterested perception of human life beneath the cliches of custom and rationalization, he rediscovered the perennial basis of tragedy. The poetry of Ghosts is under the words, in the detail of action, where Ibsen accurately sensed the tragic rhythm of human life in a thousand small figures. And these little "movements of the psyche" are composed in a complex rhythm like music, a formal development sustained (beneath the sensational story and the angry thesis) until the very end. But the action is not completed: Mrs. Alving is left screaming with the raw impact of the calamity. The music is broken off, the dissonance unresolved or, in more properly dramatic terms, the acceptance of the catastrophe, leading to the final vision or epiphany which should correspond to the insight Mrs. Alving gains in Act II, is lacking. The action of the play is neither completed nor placed in the wider context of meanings which the disinterested or contemplative purposes of poetry demand.

The unsatisfactory end of *Ghosts* may be understood in several ways. Thinking of the relation between Mrs. Alving and Oswald, one might say that she had romantically loaded more symbolic values upon her son than a human being can carry; hence his collapse proves too much more than Mrs. Alving or the audience can digest. One may say that, at the end, Ibsen himself could not quite dissociate himself from his rebellious protagonist and see her action in the round, and so broke off in anger, losing his tragic vision in the satisfaction of reducing the bourgeois parlor to a nightmare, and proving the hollowness of a society which sees human life in such myopic and dishonest terms. As a thesis play, *Ghosts* is an ancestor of many related genres: Brieux's arguments for social reform, propaganda plays like those of the Marxists, or parables a/a [Leonid Nikolaivich] Andreev, or even [Bernard] Shaw's more generalized plays of theplay-of-thought about social questions. But this use of the theater of modern realism for promoting or discussing political and social ideas never appealed to Ibsen. It did not solve his real problem, which was to use the publicly accepted theater of his time for poetic purposes. The most general way to understand the unsatisfactory end of *Ghosts* is to say that Ibsen could not find a way to represent the action of his protagonist, with all its moral and intellectual depth, within the terms of modern realism. In the attempt he truncated this action, and revealed as in a brilliant light the limitations of the bourgeois parlor as the scene of human life.

The End of Ghosts: The Tasteless Parlor and the Stage of Europe

Oswald is the chief symbol of what Mrs. Alving is seeking, and his collapse ends her quest in a horrifying catastrophe. But in the complex life of the play, all of the persons and things acquire emotional and moral significance for Mrs. Alving; and at the end, to throw as much light as possible upon the catastrophe, Ibsen brings all of the elements of his composition together in their highest symbolic valency. The orphanage has burned to the ground; the Pastor has promised Engstrand money for his "Sailor's Home" which he plans as a brothel; Regina departs, to follow her mother in the search for pleasure and money. In these eventualities the conventional morality of the Alving heritage is revealed as lewdness and dishonesty, quickly consumed in the fires of lust and greed, as Oswald himself (the central symbol) was consumed even before his birth. But what does this wreckage mean? Where are we to place it in human experience?

Ibsen can only place it in the literal parlor, with lamplight giving place to daylight, and sunrise on the empty, stimulating, virginal snow-peaks out the window. The emotional force of this complicated effect is very great; it has the searching intimacy of nightmare. But it is also as disquieting as a nightmare from which we are suddenly awakened; it is incomplete, and the contradiction between the inner power of dream and the literal appearances of the daylight world is unresolved. The spirit that moved Ibsen to write the play, and which moved his protagonist through her tragic progress, is lost to sight, disembodied, imperceptible in any form unless the dreary exaltation of the inhuman mountain scene conveys it in feeling.

Henry James felt very acutely the contradiction between the deep and strict spirit of Ibsen and his superb craftsmanship on one side, and the little scene he tried to use the parlor in its surrounding void on the other. "If the spirit is a lamp within us, glowing through what the world and the flesh make of us as through a ground-glass shade, then such pictures as Little Eyolf and John Gabriel are each a chassez-croisez of lamps burning, as in tasteless parlors, with the flame practically exposed," he wrote in *London Notes*. "There is a positive odor of spiritual paraffin. The author nevertheless arrives at the dramatist's great goal he arrives for all his meagerness at intensity. The meagerness, which is after all but an unconscious, an admirable economy, never interferes with that: it plays straight into the hands of his rare mastery of form. The contrast between this form so difficult to have reached, so 'evolved,' so civilized and the bareness and bleakness of his little northern democracy is the source of half the hard frugal charm he puts forth."

James had rejected very early in his career his own little northern democracy, that of General Grant's America, with its ugly parlor, its dead conventions, its enthusiastic materialism, and its "non-conducting atmosphere." At the same time he shared Ibsen's ethical preoccupation, and his strict sense of form. His comments on Ibsen are at once the most sympathetic and the most objective that have been written. But James's own solution was to try to find a better parlor for the theater of human life; to present the quest of his American pilgrim of culture on the wider "stage of Europe" as this might still be felt and suggested in the manners of the leisured classes in England and France. James would have nothing to do with the prophetic and revolutionary spirit which was driving the great continental authors, Ibsen among them. In his artistry and his moral exactitude Ibsen is akin to James; but this is not his whole story, and if one is to understand the spirit he tried to realize in Mrs. Alving, one must think of [S0ren] Kierkegaard, who had a great influence on Ibsen in the beginning of his career.

Kierkegaard (in *For Self-Examination)* has this to say of the disembodied and insatiable spirit of the times: "... thou wilt scarcely find anyone who does not believe in let us say, for example, the spirit of the age, the *Zeitgeist*. Even he who has taken leave of higher things and is rendered blissful by mediocrity, yea, even he who toils slavishly for paltry ends or in the contemptible servitude of ill-gotten gains, even he believes, firmly and fully too, in the spirit of the age. Well, that is natural enough, it is by no means anything very lofty he believes in, for the spirit of the age is after all no higher than the age, it keeps close to the ground, so that it is the sort of spirit which is most like will-o'-the-wisp; but yet he believes in spirit. Or he believes in the world-spirit (*Weltgeist*) that

strong spirit (for allurements, yes), that ingenious spirit (for deceits, yes); that spirit which Christianity calls an evil spirit so that, in consideration of this, it is by no means anything very lofty he believes in when he believes in the world-spirit; but yet he believes in spirit. Or he believes in 'the spirit of humanity,' not spirit in the individual, but in the race, that spirit which, when it is god-forsaken for having forsaken God, is again, according to Christianity's teaching, an evil spirit so that in view of this it is by no means anything very lofty he believes in when he believes in this spirit; but yet he believes in spirit.

"On the other hand, as soon as the talk is about a holy spirit how many, dost thou think, believe in it? Or when the talk is about an evil spirit which is to be renounced-how many, dost thou think, believe in such a thing?"

This description seems to me to throw some light upon Mrs. Alving's quest, upon Ibsen's modern-realistic scene, and upon the theater which his audience would accept. The other face of nineteenth century positivism is romantic aspiration. And Ibsen's realistic scene presents both of these aspects of the human condition: the photographically accurate parlor, in the foreground, satisfies the requirements of positivism, while the empty but stimulating scene out the window Europe as a moral void, an uninhabited wilderness offers as it were a blank check to the insatiate spirit. Ibsen always felt this exhilarating wilderness behind his cramped interiors. In *A Doll's House* we glimpse it as winter weather and black water. In *The Lady from the Sea* it is the cold ocean, with its whales and its gulls. In *The Wild Duck* it is the northern marshes, with wildfowl but no people. In the last scene of *Ghosts* it is, of course, the bright snow-peaks, which may mean Mrs. Alving's quest in its most disembodied and ambivalent form; very much the same sensuous moral void in which Wagner, having totally rejected the little human foreground where Ibsen fights his battles, unrolls the solitary action of passion. It is the "stage of Europe" before human exploration, as it might have appeared to the first hunters.

There is a kinship between the fearless and demanding spirit of Kierkegaard, and the spirit which Ibsen tried to realize in Mrs. Alving. ButMrs. Alving, like her contemporaries whom Kierkegaard describes, will not or cannot accept any interpretation of the spirit that drives her. It may look like the *Weltgeist* when she demands the joy of living, it may look like the Holy Ghost itself when one considers her appetite for truth. And it may look like the spirit of evil, a "goblin damned," when we see the desolation it produces. If one thinks of the symbols which Ibsen brings together in the last scene: the blank parlor, the wide unexplored world outside, the flames that consumed the Alving heritage and the sunrise flaming on the peaks, one may be reminded of the condition of Dante's great rebel Ulysses. He too is wrapped in the flame of his own consciousness, yet still dwells in the pride of the mind and the exhilaration of the world free of people, *il mondo senza gente.* But this analogy also may not be pressed too far. Ulysses is in hell; and when we explore the Mountain on which he was wrecked, we can place his condition with finality, and in relation to many other human modes of action and awareness. But Mrs. Alving's mountains do not place her anywhere: the realism of modern realism ends with the literal. Beyond that is not the ordered world of the tradition, but *Unendlichkeit*, and the anomalous "freedom" of undefined and uninformed aspiration.

Perhaps Mrs. Alving and Ibsen himself are closer to the role of Dante than to the role of Ulysses, seeing a hellish mode of being, but free to move on. Certainly Ibsen's development continued beyond *Ghosts,* and toward the end of his career he came much closer to achieving a consistent theatrical poetry within the confines of the theater of modern realism. He himself remarked that his poetry was to be found only in the series of his plays, no one of which was complete by itself.

Source: Francis Fergusson, "*Ghosts* and *the Cherry Orchard*: The Theater of Modern Realism," *The Idea of a Theater: A Study of Ten Plays*, Princeton University Press, 1949, pp. 146-77.

Adaptations

Ghosts was adapted as a silent film in 1915, starring Erich von Stroheim and Mary Alden. It was produced by D. W. Griffith.

There is a modern version, produced in 1986, with Judi Bench as Mrs. Alving, Kenneth Branagh as Oswald, and Natasha Richardson as Regina. Elijah Moshinsky directed.

An unabridged audio cassette, with Flo Gibson reading it as text (not "performing" it as a play) was released in 1993 by Audio Book Contractors of Washington, D. C.

Topics for Further Study

Parallels have been drawn between this play's treatment of syphilis and the current AIDS epidemic. Make a list of suggestions of changes that would have to be made to *Ghosts* if it were to be played as if Oswald had AIDS.

Write a short scene taking place between Captain Alving and Mrs. Alving, giving your audience a sense of the tension in their household when she was trying to control his cheating.

When Pastor Manders says that Johanna was a fallen woman when she was married, Mrs. Alving points out that, using the same reasoning, Captain Alving was a fallen man. In small groups, discuss how much people make such sexists distinctions in contemporary America.

The last scene of *Ghosts* deals with mercy killing, a subject that has become even more pertinent as medicine has learned to extend the lives of terminally ill people. Research outside sources that have weighed in on the euthanasia debate and write a paper explaining what you think Mrs. Alving should do about Oswald.

Research the world of Parisian artists in the 1870s and 1880s. Was their worldwide reputation for loose morals deserved? Give some examples that Ibsen might have had in mind when he was writing this play.

Compare and Contrast

1882: German engineer Gottlieb Daimler invents the first internal combustion engine.

Today: Automobiles are so common that they create constant problems of crowding and pollution in urban and suburban areas around the globe.

1882: Major industrial areas, such as New York and London, are experimenting with electrical lighting to replace gas lights.

Today: Most areas in the world have been reached with electrical cables from huge nuclear or hydroelectric generators.

1882: The first birth control clinic in the world is opened in Amsterdam by Aletta Jacobs, who is the first woman to practice medicine in Holland.

Today: Birth control is still a controversial subject, even in areas where the rates of birth to single mothers have skyrocketed.

1882: Six years after Alexander Graham Bell develops the first working telephone, Western Electric began producing telephone units.

Today: Wireless telephones and e-mail devices that use the same radio waves are among the most popular consumer products.

1882: The romantic image of the western outlaw is developed after the death of Jesse James, a bank robber who was killed by his cousin for reward money.

Today: Criminal figures are still romanticized in popular culture, particularly in rap music.

1882: Chicago, where *Ghosts* premiered, installs its first mechanized form of public transportation: electric cable cars that can travel twenty blocks along a straight street in half an hour.

Today: Underground trains and elevated trains can take passengers out of the city to the airport in that same amount of time.

What Do I Read Next?

Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People* was started before *Ghosts* but was not finished until after the latter play. It is a scathing indictment of social standards, as a doctor who points out contamination of a town's water supply goes from hero to enemy when his revelation upsets the local economy. Viking Press has a 1987 edition edited by Arthur Miller, the author *of Death of a Salesman.*

At the same time that Ibsen wrote in Norway, August Strindberg was the leading playwright in Sweden. Both playwrights explored the new realistic forms. *Miss Julie,* Strindberg's 1888 drama about an aristocratic girl and her affair with her conniving butler, is considered his best.

The Russian author Anton Chekhov is considered one of the greatest authors of short stories and dramas in history. He cited Ibsen as one of his main influences. All of Chekhov's plays are important, but The Cherry Orchard (1904) in particular examines some of the same themes as *Ghosts.*

Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw was a supporter of moderate Socialist ideas. His political analysis of Ibsen is printed as a book, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, available in a 1994 Dover Books edition.

Ibsen's life and ideas come alive in the 1970 publication *Correspondence of Henrik Ibsen,* edited by Mary Morrison.

The way that writers treat the weaknesses of the body, like Ibsen's use of syphilis to represent the decadence that is passed down from one generation to the next, was examined in Susan Sontag's classic essay *Illness as a Metaphor*, which is now published in one volume (1995) with its sequel, *AIDS and Its Metaphors .*

Stella Adler is one of the great teachers of actors in America, having been instrumental in the training of Marlon Brando, Robert DeNiro, Al Pacino, and others. In 1999, Barry Paris edited a series of her lectures into one cohesive book, *Stella Adler on Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov.*

Further Study

Archer, William, ed., *From Ibsen's Workshop: Notes, Scenarios and Drafts of the Modern Plays,* translated by A. G. Charter, Scribner, 1978.

This reprint of the 1913 study shows the process of development of Ibsen's most important works. Included is an introduction by Archer, who was one of Ibsen's most knowledgeable critics.

Clurman, Harold, "In Full Stride," in *Ibsen*, Macmillan Publishing Co., 1977.

A chapter in Clurman's critical survey of Ibsen, which covers *Ghosts* and *A Doll's House.* This analysis examines the approach actors need to take in order to fully understand the characters in the play.

Joyce, James, "Ibsen's New Drama," from *The Critical Writings of James* Joyce, Viking Penguin, 1959.

Originally published in 1900, this review of a minor, seldom-discussed Ibsen piece, *When We Dead Awaken*, touches on all of the plays in the author's long career.

Lebowitz, Naomi, *Ibsen and the Great World,* Louisiana State University Press, 1990.

This book is an in-depth look at how Ibsen's environment shaped his characterizations. Difficult and rich.

MacFarlane, James, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen,* Cambridge University Press, 1994.

An indispensable guide, with cross-references to all of Ibsen's major works and annotations about the references made in them. MacFarlane, who oversaw the publication, is one of the world's great authorities on Ibsen.

Meyer, Hans Georg, "Ibsen's Dramatic Technique," in *Henrik Ibsen,* Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1972, pp. 9-18.

Focuses mostly on the earlier plays *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* to draw generalizations about how Ibsen's style evolved throughout the different phases of his life.

Salome, Lou, *Ibsen's Heroines,* Black Swan Books, 1985.

For thorough appreciation, the chapter about the main character of Ghosts should be read along with Salome's analyses of Ibsen's other important female characters.

Theoharis, Constantine, *Ibsen's Drama: Right Action and Tragic Joy,* St. Martin's Press, 1996.

Theoharis delves deeply into the underlying psychology of each of the characters and how their interlocking needs hold the plays together.

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Esslin, Martin, "Ibsen and Modern Drama," in *Ibsen and the Theater: The Dramatist in Production,* New York University Press, 1980, pp. 71-82.

Goldman, Emma, *The Social Significance of Modern Drama*, Gorham Press, 1914.

Heiberg, Hans, in *Ibsen: A Portrait of the Artist,* translated by Joan Tate, University of Miami Press, 1987, p. 217.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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