PAPER IX D: MODERN EUROPEAN DRAMA
GHOSTS
Henrik Ibsen
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SCHOOL OF OPEN LEARNING
(Campus of Open Learning)
University of Delhi

Department of English
Prepared by: Krishna Das Gupta
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Prepared by:
Krishna Das Gupta

SCHOOL OF OPEN LEARNING
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI
5, Cavalry Lane, Delhi-110007
PART I

INTRODUCTION

"THE TIME HAS COME TO PRODUCE PLAYS OF REALITY" – EMILE ZOLA

In drama the early naturalist dramatists were Ibsen, Hauptmann and Chekov. The achievements of science has to be followed by literature. The writers should base their literary methods on science and pursue truth. That was the attitude of Zola. The modern scientific view was adopted by Ibsen Chekov and others. Though the methods are different, but the same outlook, we come across in the short organum for the theatre written by Brecht.

He writes of the need to find dramatic forms appropriate to an age of science. But simply following the scientific method, of following observation and experiment can not create art. Imaginative handling of realistic material transformed the plays of the great naturalistic writers, from documentaries to work of art. Heredity and environment play their role in these dramas. In Ibsen particularly heredity has a haunting presence. But even in realistic plays environment cannot strictly control man’s destiny.

Modern naturalistic drama stands squarely on the assumptions and achievements of science, but the greater dramatists of the naturalistic theatre are greater because of the values they implied, that some experiences are more worthwhile than others. They had a common heritage, social and economic. The social basis of the naturalistic theatre is evident from the following dates:

Communist Manifesto------ 1848 - Marx and Engels :
Madame Bovary------ 1857 - Flaubert :
1867 - Marx -Capital Vol. (1)
1871 - The Paris Commune Suppressed :

The naturalistic movement had to struggle hard to be recognised and accepted in the theatre. The great masters of the movement Ibsen and Strindberg received their first recognition in Germany, the main battle ground. Eric Bentley claimed that the success of the new theatre movement of the nineties, was the success of naturalism “The Little Theatres in European Capitals where the new plays were shown, nearly all came in to existence for the production of naturalistic plays. The drama became a fighting issue” - Eric Bentley.

We learn more from the essay “Modernist Drama-Origin & Patterns” by John Fletcher and James Mcfarlare. That “Two co-ordinates, the one substantive and thematic, the other formal and linguistic, help to pin point the origins of European Modernist Drama. On the one hand there was the compulsive attention the eighties and the nineties gave to the problematic and the contemporary. On the other there was the restless exploration of the resources of prose as a dramatic medium. Both things point unwaveringly back to Ibsen”.

Ibsen abandoned verse after Peer Gynt (1867). He started writing prose plays about contemporary problem. “To see with a clear vision, to define the problems, to break free of convention, to proclaim in their own often very idiosyncratic way the truth, however unexpected or unpalatable. These were the imperatives of the modern spirit – demonstrative, expressive, often ironical
occasionally absurdist-this trend covers the late naturalists of Germany, to show in England the early absurdist in France, Expressionist drama and individual elements in Brecht.

Ibsen is known as the founder of modern realism. In the 19th century there was a turning away from romanticism and sentimentalism in the theatre. Influence of the emerging sciences of sociology and psychology and the belief in environment as a determinant of human behaviour, had a powerful impact on literature. As in the plays of Ibsen where the audience were treated as eavesdroppers through the missing fourth wall into the goings on inside a supposedly real living room of supposedly real people. The picture frame stage contained life like settings representing contemporary events, presented by people rendering realistic dialogue. The illusion of reality was complete. And in the drama of Ibsen, modern European drama was first created.

What was new in the plays of Ibsen was not that he took middle class life as the material of his play. For him a play was not first entertainment but could probe the way life was lived. It presented an objective reality and questioned the value system of the bourgeois society. But naturalistic drama kept to the surface of life, full picture of a living society seldom emerged. A play like Ghosts has been shaped to reveal what Ibsen saw as significant in life. Motives and desires are exposed, questioned, analysed - to affirm the moral responsibility of the individual. Life is defined by values.

Henrik Ibsen’s name is closely associated with the introduction of Realism and Naturalism in modern drama. Ibsen’s life span (1828-1906) coincided with those of other great European dramatists. August Strindberg of Sweden (1849-1912) Hauptman (1862-1946) Chekhov (1860-1904) were all his younger contemporaries Engene O’Neill (1888-1953) had just come to adulthood when Ibsen died.

Naturalism as a literary movement was inspired by Emile Zola (1840-1902) Naturalistic Theatre presented real life’s problems on the picture frame stage. The audience could peep into and eavesdrop on the goings on inside the living rooms with the missing fourth wall. Real life characters, true incidents, and routine dialogue were brought out on the stage, without foils and attempted sugar coating. Society was undergoing change as a result of ideological conflicts and emerging social upheavals women along with other repressed classes were in no mood to continue with the constraints imposed by the prosperous and dominating males.

The new drama was a drama of protest against the prevailing social values. Imbued with radical ideas it voiced the smothered sentiments of the oppressed and the dispossessed. The stage sought to represent real life and an illusion of reality was created in the theatre. But reality was metamorphosed into a vision of an artistic creation of enduring value by great artists in the realist tradition. Ibsen’s plays are not documentary dramas they represent acute and realistic social tension, throbbing human passions and real life psychological analysis. Ibsen’s plays show his consciousness of moral injustice, his power to anthropize complete human relationships and in his symbolic plays such as Wild Duck, the necessity of make believe.

In Plays for the Theatre, Brockett writes, “During the 19th century, a revolt against the ideals of romanticism and sentimentality gave rise to a new literary mode, Realism. Deepening interest in the emerging sciences of sociology and psychology and emphasis on environment as a determinant of human behavior. The result was a drama based on contemporary events closely observed and carefully rendered through life like dialogue and detailed settings. Ibsen’s plays epitomize the new trend. He is called the founder of modern realism”. His social plays of the
middle period particularly are written in prose making everything seem true to life, the audience peeping, through the missing fourth wall. Realistic is neither more nor less artistic than any other form. In perfectly realistic way he did not report so much as project, or even prophesy a meaning. Put in playwriting terms, he created a symbol on the stage for example in “A DOLL’S HOUSE”. When Nora slammed the door upon her hypocritical relation with her husband, it came to be regarded as a symbol of the aspirations of a liberated woman and the door slam reverberated through Europe. The ideological aspect of the Naturalistic plays help out the criticism of outdated social values and moral ambiguities that devastated individuals. The success of the new theatre movement, was the success of Naturalism which brought freshness and vigour in theatre, which had become a place for cheap tinselled glamour.

“Through the powerful realization of the dramatic substance of human experience, Ibsen created the foundations of modern drama. New techniques have not outmoded his imaginative artistry and his profound understanding of humanity”

(Block and Shed)

Ibsen’s plays aroused social conscience and acted as a path finder in the evolution of thought of modern times. Many people reacted violently and denounced his plays. When Ghosts was first performed in London in 1891, a reviewer called it “an open drain, a loath some sore, an abominable piece, a repulsive and degrading work”.

Ibsen anticipated such reaction. In 1881 he wrote to its publisher “Ghosts will probably cause alarm in certain circles, but that cannot be helped. If it did not, it would not have been necessary to write it.”

Norway was a primitive country at the time of Ibsen’s birth. It remained backward till long after Ibsen was a grown man. But the so called enlightened nations were no more generous in their cultural and moral outlook than their the presumably less advanced communities. Ghosts and Doll’s House appeared equally scandalous to the dominant sections of other European Communities.

To really understand Ibsen’s mind. We have to hear what he writes intermittently particularly to Georg Brandes, the liberal Danish Critic, for whom Ibsen had genuine respect. This is what Ibsen wrote to Brandes, on seeing the latter’s complaint that Ibsen isolated himself and did not actively participate in work as a progressive “you are right, when you say that we must all try to spread our opinions. But I firmly believe that an intellectual pioneer can never gather a majority around him. The majority, the masses, the mob, will never catch him up; he can never rally them behind him.

PART -II

A Crowd now stands, where I stood when I wrote my earlier books. But I myself am there no longer. I am some where else –far ahead of them –or so I hope. “According to him, he wrote to portray human beings, not to create roles”.

GHOSTS
by Henrik Ibsen

Henrik Ibsen was born in March 1828 in the small town of skien on the east coast of Norway. The family was in the midst of bankruptcy and poverty, from the time of Ibsen’s childhood and
he had to take up a job at the age of sixteen and go away from his family. After a few years of effort at writing, he succeeded in getting a job as a dramatic author at the Norwegian National Theatre Bergen. It was his habit to read whenever he managed to get some time. He borrowed books from the local reading society, when he was working as an apprentice pharmacist in Grimstad, a small bleak town. He earned very little during this period. He read novels by Dickens Scandinavian romantic poets, playwrights, historians, also Voltaire and Kierkegaard. He however could not be described as highly learned.

Later he was first scene instructor of the Christian Norwegian Theatre. And was later artistic director there. In 1862 he took a job as a theatre critic. He tried to arouse interest in a living Norwegian-Theatre, his most important historical play ‘the Pretenders’, was produced at the Christiana Theatre and received great applause. This was also the first Ibsen play produced outside Scandinavia. In Copenhagen in 1871 and in 1875 by the famous Meiningen players-a pioneer company in the modern approach to staging.

Ibsen left Norway in 1864 and stayed abroad for twenty seven years, mostly in Italy and Germany. During this period he wrote his great plays and became famous all over Europe. He died at the age of Seventy Eight.

He had radical ideas and expressed his views through the themes of his plays, his unconventional ideas on marriage and morality shocked the hidebound attitude of Contemporary European Society. He got adverse reviews but, Ibsen was not concerned. And of course very many people of progressive views, were for him, and approved his ideas as expressed in his plays. The influence of his plays was far reaching. “Nora’s slamming of the door in farewell to her husband (in a Doll’s House (1879)- is a door slam which reverberated around the world”.

Ibsen was a rebel. He was constantly fighting against meanness, Hypocrisy and motheaten ideas.

*Brand*, his first major play (a dramatic poem or a poetic Tragedy) was published in 1866, with *Brand* Ibsen’s recognition as a true literary genius came. The name of his early plays are catilinae (1849) his first play The Vikings in Helgeland (1858) Love’s Comedy (1862) and The Pretenders (1863) These plays fall short of the literary merit of his later plays, and they mark the first phase of Ibsen as a dramatist.

*Brand* shows the life of an idealist priest who sacrifices himself and his all in search for his ideal. The play can be symbolically interpreted and deals with themes such as power of the human will and conscience and lack of faith.

*Peer Gynt* (1867) is at the non-realistic symbolic level. *Emperor and Julian* (1873) is a historical play, and the last one of the second phase of Ibsen’s dramatic career.

Ibsen’s social plays comprise the third phase of his writing. *The League of Youth* (1869), *The Pillars of Society* (1877), *A Doll’s House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), *An Enemy of the People* (1882). These are perhaps the most widely known of his plays. They have Social themes and raise questions on the valued assumptions of traditional society. At the time, these plays were violently criticised by many.

The last phase of his plays contains ‘The Wild Duck (1882), *The Lady from The Sea* (1888), *Hedda Gabler* (1890), *The Master Builder* (1892) and *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896). In this last
phase Ibsen makes increasing use of symbolism and these plays have themes of universal appeal and are regarded by some as his best.

**Ghosts** a domestic Tragedy was written in 1881. The play moves steadily towards catastrophe, and the prevalent social values are roundly condemned. The reception of the play was adverse in most European Cities. In Norway it was more severe, and was not allowed to be performed in any leading theatre till 1900.

Ibsen’s notes and jottings indicate that he wanted to write a drama showing the position of women in the male dominated society. His ideas matched those of the feminists of modern times, when he wrote “A Woman cannot be herself in contemporary society.”

Joan Riviere writes in 1986 that “womanliness in a cover up to be with social construction of femininity, a masquerade, whereby the woman as a category does not exist, except by mining and parodying that which in expected of her”. Ibsen pointed out the confusion and injustice bound to follow when a woman in judged by man’s law and the contradictions between her natural instincts and the conservative social ideas of authority and decorum. *A Doll’s House* which Ibsen himself describes as “an introduction or preparation to Ghosts” was written in 1879 only two years before Ghosts (1881). He further asserted that “Ghosts had to be written after Doll’s House. After Nora, Mrs. Alving had of necessity to come” Both the plays raised bitter controversy, outside the limits of the theatre, in the western press and in society. These two were part of the investigative series of “dramas of contemporary life.”

A Doll’s House, where Nora, the heroine walks out of a hypocritical relationship with her husband faced public hostility but it also was supported by a large group of Ibsen supporters.

The sanctity of marriage was further subverted by Ibsen’s next play Ghosts. Mrs. Alving exposes the sham of a so called respectable marriage and the unmitigated disaster which it brought to her and her child. Ibsen here questioned the fate of contemporary woman, denied any opportunity for self fulfillment. He wrote about themes which society preferred to keep under wraps. He wanted ‘that a few frontier posts should be moved’.

In contrast to the established theatres of Europe, which denied the performance of Ghosts for many years, many private and independent theatres of Europe welcomed the play and described it as showing what a contemporary drama should show. The ‘problem’, posed in these plays preoccupied the public mind. The tradition ushered in had many who subsequently followed it. To name a few of these dramatists who were committed to show up truth, are the following - Hauptman, Show, Wedekind, Gorky, O’Neill and Brecht.

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**(1) DETAILED SUMMARY**

At the beginning of the play we know that Captain Alving is no longer alive and a memorial in the shape of an orphanage is being raised to him. Manders the Priest, has come for the inauguration. So many other things are talked about. Regina, Mrs. Alving’s maid speaks to her father, Engstrand-the carpenter. It is obvious that the man has a dubious character and Regina resists his efforts to take her away with him to the seamen’s home for sailors, he intends to set up. His intentions are not strictly honest and Regina asks him to go away, which he does for the time being.

Oswald, the junior Alving has come home after a long interval. His mother is happy at the
son's homecoming. Manders the pastor and Mrs. Alving has a long conversation and skeletons come spilling out of the cupboard. Behind the facade of a respectable household lurked a miserable existence. Mrs. Alving had tried to escape from this intolerable bondage a year after her marriage. The marriage was a sham. Her husband led a profligate life and had all sort of vices. But she was led back to this marriage by Manders himself. She was made to feel, that she was running away from her duty. But unfortunately nothing was changed in her husband’s ways. Oswald was born and his father’s affair with their maid had also some horrible consequences. Out of desperation, Mrs Alving sent her son out of the country, to save him from being polluted by the atmosphere in his house.

But history is about to repeat itself. To the horror of his mother--Oswald is trying to build up a relationship with Regina.

Mrs. Alving informs Manders that Regina is actually the daughter of Captain Alving, born out of his affair with the household maid. She was given some hush money and married Engstrand, the carpenter.

Mrs. Alving is critical of herself. She feels that the she should not have concealed from her son the real facts of their life. Manders, the champion of the Orthodox attitude to social decorum and family propriety, is shocked at the suggestion. For, him the appearance of the father being good and virtuous must be maintained, whatever the reality may be.

Manders naively used to think of Engstrand as one who had a genuine regret for his sins. Further shock awaited him, when Mrs Alving tells him the real facts. Also when he hears Mrs Alving’s radical views on marriage and society.

She wants that Oswald should be sincere in his intentions to Regina -”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”.

But what stopped her was the presence of ghosts in her psyche. By ghosts, she means all dead ideas and worn out beliefs that inhibit us from taking the right decision in conformity with our conscience and emotions.

Manders puts all the blame on the literature read by Mrs Alving. The free thinking literature Mander’s thinks, is responsible for her ideas, revolting, according to him, the champion of orthodoxy. Mrs Alving in her youth was in love with Manders. She, had staked her marriage and would have taken refuge with him.

But Mander’s with all his backward conformity was a man of principle. As a Priest, he led her back to what he considered to be the right path and restored her to her husband. Never mind, all the agony she underwent for the rest of her life. The basic question, raised by Mrs Alving is whether we should follow general principles that a child should honour his parents or that particular cases should be decided separately. As in the case of Captain Alving and his son. Whether every parent is worthy of the love and respect expected of the child. Mrs. Alving regrets that she had so long nurtured in Oswald the false faith in his father’s goodness, when the reality was totally different. She does her best to conceal the truth from all even after Captain Alving’s death. She has built an Orphanage ostensibly, to honour her husband’s memory. Her real motive is somewhat different though. She wants to silence all rumours and she does not want Oswald to inherit anything of his father’s property. She wants to rid her house of everything associated with her husband. The carpenter comes and talks to Manders. He puts on airs of a very pious man. When confronted with the
falsehood of claiming being the father of Regina, he spins another fairytale. Manders is over bowled.
He regrets having misjudged Engstrand, and is taken in completely by his sweet talk. He goes to the
orphanage to conduct a prayer meeting, at the suggestion of Engstrand, little realising that he is
stepping into a trap.

Now Mrs. Alving and Oswald are by themselves, and the grim situation unfolds. Oswald
reveals to his mother that he is suffering from a strange illness. "My mind has broken down—gone to
pieces—I shall never be able to work any more!"

The Doctor whom he had consulted in Paris told him frankly that he was suffering from
hereditary Syphilis, passed on to him by his father's sinful ways.

Oswald was misled into thinking that his father was the model of virtue, so he refused to
take the doctor's opinion, that he had inherited the disease. He imagined that he himself was re-
sponsible for the disease, which he had contracted due to the joyous happy life he had lived with his
comrades. That must have been he thinks, too much for his strength.

He feels depressed due to the gloomy weather. He needs somebody to help him out of the
gloom. He looks upon Regina, the beautiful strong girl as his life's mate. He had promised her to be
taken to Paris. The joy of life, he hankers after, can only be provided by Regina, Oswald explains
that the joy of life is the same as the joy of work—and people abroad were aware of it. Simply being
alive made them happy, unlike this gloomy northern hometown of the Alvings. Here life was
looked upon as a burden of duty, to be carried under a forever dripping sky.

Manders comes in and is told by Oswald that Regina is going away with him as his wife.
But before anything comes out by way of explanation, a flame bursts out at the orphanage. They had
not insured the orphanage out of fear of public criticism. As the orphanage as Manders puts it, is
dedicated to higher uses, insuring it would have meant that Manders and Mrs Alving did not have
proper reliance on Divine protection.

The orphanage has burnt down to cinders. And Engstrand has puts the blame squarely on
Manders. He wants to have him under his thumb, and he has fabricated a tale, that Manders had
carried a candle inside and threw it carelessly without properly snuffing it out. Then as he makes
Manders feel guilty, Engstrand acts as the saviour and says he will accept all the blame for another's
mischief. Thus he completely wins over Manders and it is evident that he will get out of him
whatever advantage he wants to have for his own benefit.

After they leave, Mrs Alving talks to Regina and Oswald. She tells them that infact Regina
is the half-sister of Oswald.

Regina reacts in a manner, perhaps right in a way. She refuses to stay on with the Alvings.
She would rather go out and taste the joy of life. She blames Mrs. Alving for not bringing her up
like a gentleman's daughter and does not care for Mrs. Alving's concern that she will be going to
her ruin if she goes to the sailor's home (Alving Home) set up by Engstrand.

Mother and son are left alone. Then Mrs Alving is told the real nature of Oswald’s illness -
the softening of the brain, Which would soon make him as helpless as a child Oswald requests his
mother to help him end his life before that terrible tragedy overtakes him. And before the very eyes
of Mrs. Alving, her son gets the attack of the terrible disease which is nothing less than living death.

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**TITLE AND THEME**

*GHOSTS*: Written in 1881, is an unmitigated tragedy. The contemporary society is the
villain of the play. And it seems the relevance still holds good with regard to the state of many societies, even now. Society had reacted with matching virulence to this condemnation. 1891 private performance of Ghosts in London was severely attacked. The production of the play in London was severely attacked. The production of the play by Otto Brahm his ‘Freie Buhne’ (Free Theatre) has been described as a “Land mark in German theatrical history”. It began the development of the modern realistic drama in Germany with such playwrights as Gerhart Hauptmann and other : in Norway, the reaction was more hostile. Till 1990, no leading theatre allowed its performance.

The title of the play applies as much to the reenactment of the activities of the senior Alving by the junior one, as to all the dead ideas and worn out beliefs inherited from the past, Ghosts haunt the Alving household as many others, Ghosts of outdated beliefs and ideals; of half forgotten cruelties and betrayals. The living people’s minds are stultified by these suffocating beliefs. They are not even aware of being bound by such chains handed down from the past, as they, in turn hand it over to the future generations Oswald, had wanted to accept Regina as his partner in sharing the joy of life, which for him meant the joy of work, but it could not be and Regina too has inherited something of her mother’s character. The Ghosts of the past haunt both Oswald and Regina

**Theme**: The theme has a wider implication than simply the sins of the father.

Mrs. Alving had committed sins, no less heinous, than those committed by her husband. She was burdened by the attitudes and pressure of prevalent social mores. She had agreed to marry Alving as a prize catch. Though she was in love with Manders. She got married to Alving because of his property, and wealth. Then when she found it impossible to continue staying with Alving, a totally dissolute man, She tried to escape and took refuge with Manders. Manders, did his duty as a Pastor. As he says—it was a hard won victory on himself. He did his duty, and made the lady go back to fulfil her marital obligations. The result was the birth of Oswald with the inherited disease.

Mrs. Alving regrets her action in coming back. She condemns herself as a coward. She now knows that she should have been frank with Oswald and told him about his father’s real character and the other things, hidden from him, so long. Now she is prepared even for the union of Oswald and Regina. She wants to be rid of all the dead ideas and prejudices that play havoc with the lives of people.

She even has sympathy for her husband at this remove of time. He also had a sense of the joy of life, which could not be fulfilled in the small town, which he made his home. There was no way of fulfilling his craving for happiness. All that could be obtained there, was dissipation. Nobody was there capable of appreciating what the joy of life meant. She blames herself as she could not bring sunshine into this gloom. She was taught only about duty and she made everything turn on duty. Oswald is told that his father was a lost man before Oswald’s birth. That Regina was his half-sister.

It is a complicated web of one’s idea of duty and consequent contradictory claims of right and wrong, that of inherited guilt and hereditary disease, of concealment and unavoidable exposure, that weaves the theme of *Ghosts*.

Basically the play is about the old attitude and outdated ideas that people are carrying on with them. These inhibit free thinking and stop people from deciding with open mind as to what brings about happiness and joy in life. Fear of society and opinion of others frighten people from following their own wish, inclination and instinct. This results in perversion and aberration. The
fear of what the people will say, comes in the way of justice and fair play. The mind becomes like a stagnant pool, and a closed room; without any breath of fresh air.

Mrs. Alving at the earlier stage and Mander’s throughout decides everything on the basis of dead ideas and worn out beliefs. After all the suffering Mrs. Alving calls these beliefs and ideas Ghosts of beliefs, the Ghosts abounding in the world and haunting the minds of people. Oswald names these as antiquated superstition. The idea that the child must feel affection for the parent, whatever, be the character of that person, is nothing more than an antiquated superstition for Oswald. He cannot feel anything but disgust for the man, responsible for ruining his life. Mrs. Alving had tried her best to protect her child from the pollution at home. But his blood was poisoned even before his birth. So Mrs. Alving’s behaviour in letting herself be prevailed upon to come back to her husband resulted in the cascading misfortunes coming upon her son, herself and on everybody around.

Manders has tried his best to act according to his ideas of righteousness. But as Mrs. Alving puts it all his efforts regarding the Alving household atleast, have resulted in the most ignominious defeat of his life. The irony of such hidebound believers is that they are too uncritical of situations and people. Manders disapproves of Mrs. Alving’s reading without caring to find out what these books really contain. To Mrs. Alving’s charge that he is denouncing something without knowing anything about it. Manders reply is revealing - “There are many occasions in life when one has to rely on the opinions of others, that is the way in this world, and it is quite right that it should be so, what would become of society otherwise?”

So it is the society and not the individual, that should be taken care of and listened to. To keep the society going is Manders’ aim. He is society’s champion and he refuses to call a spade a spade. When after intense self-examination, Mrs. Alving compares her own marriage with that of Engstrand and Regina’s mother, Manders is shocked. Mrs. Alving says her marriage was as much one of convenience as that of Engstrand’s. As Alving was very prosperous, relations pursued Mrs. Alving to go in for the match. The disastrous result was not foreseen by any of these well-wishers. Manders refuses to see any similarity between the two marriages. He blandly remarks that atleast Mrs. Alving’s remark is apt and to the point -"Oh Law and Order ! ................." that is at the bottom of all the misery in the world.

Hypocrisy and make believe is practised by so called respectable people. Basic human bonds and genuine emotions are disregarded by people masquerading as pillars of society. Oswald speaks of people, he came across abroad. He comments on these hypocrites who talk of immorality abroad and in fact they besmirch the glorious freedom of the beautiful life over there. The thrust of the play is to expose the misery caused to people by the web of falsehood woven to keep up appearances and the abuse of the real concepts of love and duty.

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**CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF GHOSTS**

Contemporary European society was scandalised by Ibsen’s *Ghosts*. It was scandalised by the exposure of what it wanted to keep under wraps. Syphilis was inherited by Oswald from his father, blighting his whole existence. More objectionable was Mrs. Alving’s assertion that there are dozens of married couples who may be related as half siblings, as she says that she will not withhold her permission to the union of Oswald and Regina. The books encouraging free thinking,
disapproved by Manders is no longer of course considered subversive to the society. Effective medicine has been invented since then, to cure hereditary syphilis.

The real theme is the desire to hush up scandals. The dead ideas and outdated beliefs that massed up the life of people. The original sin was committed by Mrs. Alving. Trying to sacrifice her life to the altar of duty. She spoiled her own life and, that of her son Mr. Manders is a perfect example of the ineffective goodness that brings about nothing but misfortune all around. This spokesman of the orthodox society believes sincerely in all the cliches mouthed to follow the worn out path of such called duty. The orphanage, dedicated to the memory of Captain Alving, is symbolically burnt down in the end. It indicated the destruction of all institutions based on falsity and deceit. There is something other than the destruction of the orphanage standing purely as a symbol.

The crippled Engstrand, has his way with Manders threatening blackmail, he makes use of his fear of public opinion. Manders is compelled to sponsor his haven for lonely sailors an euphemism for a brothel. Ironically, for the sake of Manders, Engstrand speaks of it as a place dedicated to the good of the community. It is to be named Captain Alving’s haven. There is biting irony in Engstrand’s statement—“I shall make bold to hope that it may be worthy of hearing the late Mr. Alving’s name”. Thus the top and bottom layer of society unite in perpetuating the fraud on the good will of people. It is asked whether the planned haven, sanctified by the priest is also going to burn down?

Almost all the characters in the play are victims of either misconceptions or sins committed by others. It is the society which is the villain. The living characters try their best to mend the situation, even though it is too late.

The play with all its grimness is not really pessimistic Oswald’s last words, before he collapses—“Let us live together as long as we can”. “Ghosts possesses a compact force almost buoyancy, a kind of hope against hope. It is that of a person battered, battled and all but destroyed who still moves with a certain assurance as though destined to victory.”

(Ibsen by Harold Clurman - Page .....126)

Mrs. Alving had concealed her husband’s misdeeds for long. By building the orphanage with the entire Alving fortune. She thought, she would be able to come free of all the sway of Alving’s heritage. She hoped to be free and make Oswald free to enjoy the innocent unconventional joy of life. But tragically the power of the dead is too strong to be shaken off. The pastor’s timidity, Engstrand’s attempt to blackmail Regina—the desire of Oswald to marry Regina and on top of it the discovery of Oswald’s inherited disease—all are manifestation of the corruption that the marriage bred and stared Mrs. Alving in the face. The inescapable fact is that the marriage should have broken down, and she should have left her husband instead of trying to keep up the appearance of a blissful married life.

The play is a thesis thriller with a well made plot it turns as series of debates on conventional morality between Mrs. Alving and the Pastor, the Pastor and Oswald, and Oswald and Mrs. Alving.

In accordance with the rules of the well-made play, the characters and their relationships merely illustrate the logically arranged events. The clearly presented story is told with mounting and controlled suspense. Each act ends with promise of new developments.

The tragedy behind the thesis is Mrs. Alving search for a free human life for herself and her son. She tests everybody and everything in the light of her own moral sensibility. “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”.

Mrs. Alving makes of her son—the Symbol of all her quest—freedom, innocence, joy and truth. At the beginning of Act I Manders and Mrs. Alving start discussion regarding the orphanage. In course of the discussion, Mrs. Alving’s emancipated attitude and Mander’s conventionality clash. The pastor wants to make Oswald a model citizen as his father was, But Mrs. Alving has learnt at much cost to herself, the hollowness of such ideal citizens and she does not want Oswald to have anything to do with his fathers heritage either materially or otherwise. The first entry of Oswald on the scene marks him almost as the shadow of his own father. Though his mother thinks he has more resemblance with her, and significantly she says he has much more of a clergymen’s mouth. (We must remember that his mother was in love with the pastor, during the early years of her marriage) Manders finds in Oswald the very reincarnation of his father. Oswald recalls the nausea and cold sweat he had, when as a child he was made to smoke by his father—he recognises himself as his father’s victim—a premonition of the discovery at the end of the play Oswald’s brief scene, acts as the prologue for the second round of the clash between his mother and the pastor, Manders starts his diatribe against Mrs. Alving as soon as Oswald leaves.

She is accused of irresponsibility towards her wedded life and her son. Mrs. Alving tells Manders of the torture she had undergone and how she had decided to break free from all the sordidness of the past and also to liberate Oswald from the haunting ghosts of the past. But her dream castle crumbles, as the past comes back and strikes with full fury, when Mrs. Alving hears from behind the closed doors the reenactment of the scene between Regina’s mother and her husband, by Regina and Oswald the tragic realisation of all humans being haunted by Ghosts. Ghosts of defunct theories and dead beliefs and all are afraid of the light. Then finally the catastrophe is revealed in a nightmarish scenario as Oswald collapses in the final scene. It seems there is hardly any escape from the past. Towards the end all components of the play are brought out, showing their symbolic relevance—The orphanage burns down—no memorial with pious intentions can be built for a man who lived without any moral scruples. The pastor promising co-operation and help for Engstrand’s “Sailor’s Home”. Which he plans with questionable intentions—The pastor goes on naively believing on the apparent cliches and false sentiments—Regina departs in search of easy life—another victim of the unshakable past.

All these symbols point to the lewd and dishonest Alving heritage being burnt down and destroyed. Oswald himself doomed to destruction even before his birth.

Mrs. Alving’s quest for a true and free human life for herself and her son ends in a terrible catastrophe, but this does not end her search and the relevance of her quest for a more meaningful and better life remains. She has not given up her protest nor her questioning. The compulsions of a well made thesis play made it necessary for a sensational ending, but it does leave an impression of an unsatisfactory end. Mrs. Alving is made to accept her son’s fate. Her spirit is not reconciled to it.

CHARACTERS

Ibsen’s fundamental conviction was that “The individual’s inner self is the wellspring or true warrant for all just action. The interposition or rule of official authority or dogma by state, church, partly, traps the person in one manner or another, cripples the self, destroys authenticity and spells spiritual rule. External authority can be valid only if it wins the assent of the individual soul”.

(Clurman-Ibsen Macmillan Press 1977)
Mrs. Alving-committed the initial sin. She agreed to marry for money, ignoring the dictates of her heart. The marriage predictably ends up in disaster. Mrs. Alving later on tries to shake off the marriage and following her instincts she seeks to find haven with the man she loved. But pastor Manders upholding conventional social values, prevails upon her to mend her unconventional attitude and go back to fulfil the obligations of her marriage. This compromise spells doom. Her son is born with a cursed disease inherited from his father. Mrs. Alving behaves like a coward, as later on she recognises herself to be. It is only gradually that she tears herself free from all the meaningless conventions and is able to reach self realization. As she speaks to Manders, she resolves that she will break free of all the hypocritical conventions and work her way to freedom.

She has reached a stage in her life when past is illuminated with self-knowledge. Oswald’s resemblance to his father both in looks and behaviour, makes it easier for her to acquire this knowledge. When Oswald first appears, Manders comments on his close resemblance to his father. Mrs. Alving tells him that Oswald takes after her and is much more like a clergyman about the mouth, actually she wants to wipe off all traces of his father from Oswald’s personality. She has donated the entire wealth of Alving to the orphanage and regrets having brought up Oswald under a wrong impression that his father was an ideal man. Her long simmering rebellion, she now feels, should have been brought into the open, and that her reason and feelings were pointing to the right direction in urging her to go against all that the traditional social norms made her do. Initially of course what makes her regret her earlier attitude was that Oswald was trying to come closer to Regina, later on she realises her more serious mistake in coming back to her reprobate husband. Oswald imbibed the hereditary disease in the womb and he was doomed from birth.

Was Mrs. Alving right in her decision to run away from a loveless and tyrannical marriage. She was, And her final gesture of freedom was too late to save her son.

Manders—— is a good well-intentioned man. He is innocent of evil and is a person who would do good to all. Ironically all his efforts to set people on the road to virtue ends up with disaster. Personally his intentions are without a tinge of selfishness and dishonesty. We get a glimpse into his innermost and forever silenced feelings. When he speaks to Mrs. Alving in the second Act of Slost s Mrs. Alving tells him that when she closely examined all the pastor’s teachings that she must submit to what he called her duty and obligations, she realised that it was only machine made. Manders answers—— “Is that all I accomplished by the hardest struggle of my life?” and further, “It was the greatest victory of my life Helen; victory over myself. Though he perhaps unwillingly gives himself away talking these words, he never acknowledges even to himself, that he had any weakness for Mrs. Alving, even in his younger days. He expects such meaningless self serial from all for the sake of social conformity. He is the champion of all the hollow virtues of society. For him appearance is more important than reality. He never questions the motives and worth of people. Paying lip service to the values of the accepted social norms is acceptable to him. He is ironically treated in the play and with all his respect for law and order, ends up backing the scoundrel Engstrand.

**Ghosts** deals with issues more serious than those in **Doll’s House**.

It is the story of Mrs. Alving, and her son Oswald. They are doomed through the sinful life of captain Alving. Mrs. Alving’s husband and oswald’s father. It is inheritance which really haunts us. We are creatures of our past.

The most important statement in the play is made by Mrs. Alving——
CONCLUSION

“Ghosts— I almost believe we are all ghosts. Pastor Manders. It is not only what we have inherited from our fathers and mothers that walks in us. It is every kind of dead idea. lifeless old beliefs and so on. They are not alive, but they cling to us for all that and we can never rid ourselves of them. Whenever I read a newspaper I seem to see ghosts stealing between the lines. There must be ghosts the whole country over, as thick as the sands of the sea. And then we are all of us so wretchedly afraid of the light”.

The protest against dead beliefs is voiced here and cry for light. At the end Oswald cries for the ‘glad flames of day’

“Mother give me the sun”.

Oswald expects to pursue the joy of life and the act of mercy to be shown by Regina, the joy of life which ironically was responsible for the sins of captain Alving. The burning down of the orphanage suggests the denial of mercy to Mrs. Alving as she does not have faith.

LIST OF RESOURCE BOOKS.

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Drama and Reality — Ronald Gaskell
(Routledge and Kegan Paul London)

The Idea of a Theatre — Francis Fergusson
(Princeton University press 1972
Princeton, - New Jersey)

Ibsen — Harold Clurman
(Masters of World Literature 1977)

Plays for the Theatre — Brockett
(An Anthology of World Drama 1967)

Twelve Modern Dramatists — Raymond Cowell
(Pergamon Press - 1967)