

# Ibsen's Marriage of Art and Life: A Lucid Examination

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Henrik Ibsen is one of those few dramatists whose plays have been subjected to an avalanche of critical analyses. Many analytical discussions of Ibsen's work have been hasty, sometimes bordering on stark emptiness, while some have been very carefully and cautiously done. However, for a clearer understanding of Ibsen's art, Ibsen the man and Ibsen the playwright should be carefully joined as a bi-partite entity. Critics like George Bernard Shaw have vehemently called our attention to Ibsen's idealism, and most Ibsen scholars seem to be obsessed with this idea. But idealism is not the main motivation of Ibsen's creativity. That Ibsen is a prolific writer and an indefatigable moralist is not debatable. But most of his works, especially his family plays, are not merely motivated by his obsession for morality. His writing is a marriage of art and life.

It is the aim of this paper to trace the facts and situations, even problems, attendant on Ibsen's family life and discern how these have influenced his writing. We shall also examine the characters in some plays of Ibsen to see whether they resemble family members and friends, the main aim being to discover how their character, personality, problems and situations have been injected into the plays. This exercise will enable us to see clearly how the "ghosts" of Ibsen's life, as is the case of Mrs. Alving, also haunt his art.

Let me hasten to say, at this juncture, that the experience of an artist constitutes the artistic range of that creative writer. Since the valuable raw material to the artist is his own experience, he is comfortable when he writes about the types of things he encounters and the types of people with whom he has come into contact. Creativity, therefore, results from the vision of the individual artist, coupled with a deliberate urge on the part of that artist to express the vision. A work of art, evidently, results from the desire to communicate such vision to others. The ability to blend personal experience with universality, divorcing it from apparent subjectivity, makes the interesting difference between good and bad writing. Ibsen was able to do this excellently and this is why his works have been able to stand the test of time.

## **Ibsen the man and Ibsen the Playwright**

### *A Bi-partite approach*

P.F.D. Tennant, in *Ibsen's Dramatic Technique*, maintains that there are two

personalities perceivable in Ibsen – the real and outward personalities. Tennant opines that

One can hardly say that, regarded from the point of view of experience, Ibsen's work can be conceived as a reflection of this outward man. But as we have seen, this outward man was a studied pose, a fortification behind which to conceal himself. The real man is revealed in the fixed pattern of themes which recur in his work, or realized in his art, desires which moral cowardice forbade him to fulfill in his life.<sup>1</sup>

This conflict of art and life has continued to intrude into Ibsen's plays and has considerably influenced the theme of the plays. Significantly, almost all Ibsen's plays have as their basic situation the family complex. This situation is further broken into themes which he uses to form the dramatic conflict of his plays. Some of these themes are problems of marriage, parent/child relationship, incest, illegitimacy and heredity. Some of the problems recur in several plays, but the major problem of family relations continues to exist in all his major plays. What Ibsen supporters call his campaign for moral reform by exposing the hypocrisy of the middle class, should also be seen as Ibsen's exposure of his own family problems as well as situations he has lived through in his own life.

### **Exile and Return Technique**

The style with which Ibsen writes not only centers on the family, but is similar in almost all his family plays. A careful appraisal of Ibsen's major plays discloses a static dramatic technique. A technique that registers the family situation as the soul of existence. To show the social impact of the family situation in the lives of the personages, he presents a picture of a family situation in the lives of the personages, he presents a picture of a family living its life and on the surface, loving each other. Then a visitor, sexually an old friend of the family who had been "exiled" for one reason or another, arrives. It is the old friend who leads Ibsen to the exposition of the several aspects of the play, because the old friend discusses, chats and recollects the past and, if possible, the intervening period his "exile". Ibsen is careful to make the "exile" reflect exile of physical presence, not exile of affection. Thus, a possible return from exile is foreshadowed quite early in the plays. The time of recollection is endless. The catastrophe comes when the influence of the past is made to weight on the present. In almost all cases, the visitor departs leaving the family to face alone the devastation and catastrophe caused by his return. This style pervades almost all Ibsen's plays that center on the family situation. A quick examination will suffice.

In *Ghosts*, for instance, Pastor Manders returns to the Alving family home after many years of "exile," and learns about the past of which he was formerly ignorant. In *The Wild Duck*, the exile of physical contact between Gregers and Hjalmar has lasted for about seventeen years before his eventual return. The resultant discussion that follows instigates the exposition and eventual catastrophe. In *Rosmersholm*, Brendel, the old tutor of Rosmer, returns from his period of "exile" and this starts the catastrophe. In *The Lady*

from the Sea, a stranger's arrival in the third act of the play marks the beginning of the eventual end. These instances are endless: in *A Doll's House*, in *Hedda Gabler*, the technique is repeated by Ibsen. This technique accords Ibsen the opportunity of exposing latent family problems without authorial intrusion. The technique has been most effective in not only establishing a strong point of attack, but in strengthening the conflict of his plays.

### **Family Problems in Ibsen's Plays**

The characters in Ibsen's plays are made to face family problems which are in turn made to serve a bi-partite purpose: to establish dramatic conflict in the plays and also enhance a lucid and progressive exposition. To achieve this dual intention, Ibsen resorts to his characteristic technique of exile and return. These aspects of family problems are expounded in Ibsen's family plays: marriage, illegitimacy and heredity. The problems are not pedestrian or regular ones that visit all middle-class families of the age. Ibsen attempts to make the problems unique in order to give them amplitude which characterizes tragic drama. Let us examine these problems in greater detail.

#### **Marriage**

Lack of love has been the major factor that prevents the existence of an ideal matrimonial relationship in the works of Ibsen. It is this lack of love that causes the eventual conflict which in turn leads to the final catastrophe. For instance, Nora's recognition that her relationship with her husband is really not the ideal one she had seen herself embarking upon, shatters her illusions about herself; and Mrs. Alving's discovery of her husband's extra-matrimonial affairs, and her inability to leave him because of the duties imposed on her by society, leads her to the final tragedy. These problems are numerous, and one finds either similarities or antitheses among them. Comparing *Ghosts* with *The Wild Duck*, George Bernard Shaw observes that

*The Wild Duck* is not, like Mrs. Alving's, a handsome home made miserable by superstitious illusions, but a shabby one made happy by romantic illusions.<sup>2</sup>

Looking back at Ibsen's family life, one observes that the great poet suffered a depressing childhood, a childhood fraught with poverty and lack of love both between him and his parents on the one hand, and between his parents on the other. Quite early in his life, Ibsen's father had gone bankrupt, and this had put the family into penury. It was under this situation that young Ibsen left home even before attaining the age of sixteen. He became an Apothecary's apprentice in Grimstad, was reported to have had no friends, and earned his living from them till the end of his hectic life. Owing to the poor relationship between him and his family, he never came back home until 1850 before he moved to Oslo as a student after having been jilted in love. The next time he visited home was in 1859, and once more in 1860. According to records, on each of these two visits, he merely came to beg money from his uncle and never cared to see his parents.

Despite the fact that Ibsen had given some flimsy reasons to account for his alienation

from his family, he could not adduce any reason to account for his reaction to the death of his parents. Tennant records that

When his mother died in 1869 he waited several months before answering his sister's letter announcing her death. When his old rake of a father, Knud Ibsen, died in 1877 he wrote to his uncle and thanked him for the care he had taken of the drink-sodden old degenerate, but expressed no grief at his death, and personal accounts tell how unperturbed he was when he received the news.<sup>3</sup>

There is no doubt, therefore, that Ibsen was reared in a loveless, hypocritical family, his mother a self-effacing woman, his father a drink-sodden scoundrel. But the lack of love in Ibsen's family is not the playwright's only reason for his grim treatment of the family in his plays. He has also had his own share of rejection in love, finally marrying a woman, not because of love, but for the purpose of fulfilling the requirement of society.

Apart from his tampering with a servant girl whom he made pregnant, the playwright had two unsuccessful love affairs. His first love affair was with Clara Ebbel, with whom he fell in love in the Autumn of 1849, but who jilted him early the next year. He later fell in love with a fifteen-and-half year old girl, Rikke Holst, to whom he proposed in verse in June 1853, but his secret betrothal to the girl was broken soon after by the girl's enraged father. It was this state of affairs that caused him, in 1856, to marry Susannah Thoresen who was described as lame, unkempt, and with a depressing personality. Further evidence shows that Ibsen even started flirting with younger women later in his life. In the summer of 1889 which he spent in Gosensass, for instance, he was known to have had affection for German painter, Helene Raff, and a Viennese girl, Emilie Bardach. One can, therefore, conclude that what some critics refer to as Ibsen's revolt against society may well be the great poet's recapitulation of the events that took place in his life.

George Bernard Shaw believes that the major problem in *Ghosts* is that the woman, Mrs. Alving, goes on manufacturing lies, making life joyless and unnatural for her husband. Shaw maintains that in driving her husband "to steal his pleasures in secrecy and squalor, they had brought upon him the diseases bred by such conditions."<sup>4</sup> It is significant, then, that Ibsen expects that a man who has a sensuous temperament ought to be allowed some freedom, even at the expense of promiscuity, so he does not resort to hidden utilization of pleasures, like Captain Alving.

In *An Enemy of the People*, one also notices a trace of Ibsen the man. A careful perusal of the play reveals that its greatness does not only lie on its idealism but on its being a rejoinder to *Ghosts*, just like *Ghosts* is a rejoinder to *A Doll's House*. Taking into consideration the avalanche of abuses and criticism showered on Ibsen after writing *Ghosts*, one immediately sees the resemblance between the fate of Ibsen and that of Dr. Stockmann. For in the same way Ibsen was abused for writing about the hypocrisy and excesses of the

middle class, a fact of which everybody was relatively aware, so Dr. Stockmann was “boycotted, stoned, and driven from the town, merely for saying aloud what everyone privately knows to be the truth.”<sup>5</sup>

### Illegitimacy

Another point that recurs in Ibsen’s plays in the problem of illegitimacy. In *Ghosts*, we see Regina who is portrayed as the illegitimate daughter of Captain Alving. The same problem of illegitimacy also occurs in *The Wild Duck*. This theme was also an over-riding factor in Ibsen’s life and was one of the reasons that alienated him from his parents.

Both Ibsen and his father agree in the account that young Ibsen was born in Skien on March 20, 1828, but they differ with each other as to his place of birth. Henrik Ibsen, himself, believes that he was born in the family house of Stockmann’s garden, but his father maintained that he was born in the house of a family friend, Wamberg. Traditions of the town tend to support the father’s version of the story.

But the most unfortunate story about Ibsen’s birth is not only the conflicting stories about his birth place, but the suspicion that he was not actually the son of his father. Hence, as young man, he was faced with the unfortunate rumour that he was an illegitimate son. This forced him to dread his father and pity his mother. In a family where the man feels that he is not the father of his son, there would be conflicts and problems that might be latent, but which would make an indelible mark in a person’s mind for ever, and affect his future dealings in life. This was what happened to Henrik Ibsen.

Professor Tennant who received a Cambridge Scandinavian fund for a study of Ibsen had the advantage of getting the libraries of Oslo University and the Bergen Museum at his disposal. This, in addition to the Royal Theatre of Copenhagen, the co-operation of the Scandinavian society at the University of Cambridge, and other field studies, helped him to arrive at positive conclusions about Ibsen’s birth. He states:

His father seemed to like to spread an air of mystery about the birthplace of his son, and this probably fostered a suspicion and a wish in Ibsen himself that he might after all not be his father’s son. Such suspicions would have given additional strength to an aversion, which Ibsen had felt for his father at an early age. An affection for his mother, which was perhaps rather pity than anything else, helped to group his parents in his mind in a relationship which pursued him all through life and stultified his emotional development. His father’s bankruptcy, and the family’s social ignominy when he was no more than eight years old fixed the situation indelibly in his mind.<sup>6</sup>

Another Ibsen scholar, Hans Heiberg, also refers to this point of Ibsen’s illegitimacy and states that “it was not Knud Ibsen, but Tormod Knudsen, the Telemark poet, later a

member of Parliament, who was the child's [Ibsen's] father."<sup>7</sup> So the story spread and gradually flew into every ear and eventually became an open secret. It is not unlikely, therefore, that the great poet then decided to address himself on this problem of illegitimacy with which mystery his own birth had been clouded.

Obviously, it is customary for one to deny paternity of a child that does not belong to him. It is also a known fact that in all cultures, Norwegian inclusive, no sane person claims a child that does not belong to him, no matter how talented or prominent that child may be. In the case of Ibsen, his suspected father did not deny paternity. As Heinberg puts it,

It is notorious that Tormod Knudson in his old age had boasted in his cups that he was Ibsen's father, but this was probably after the legend had become common knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Regretably, Henrik Ibsen was caught up with two fathers: his biological father and his social father, both of whom were drunks and went after the pleasures of life with reckless abandon. The marriage between his father, Knud Ibsen, and his mother, Marken, was of convenience. Knud Ibsen was a reckless man who dissipated the family funds in the pursuit of his pleasures. And this situation kept haunting the great poet. Further evidence proves that Tormod Knudsen, Ibsen's suspected father, met Ibsen's mother, Marken Altenburg, in 1825 and they were known to have fallen in love, despite the fact that she was already engaged to Knud Ibsen. Tormod was then a Clerk at the Sheriff's office in Kviteseid, and Marken was working for the Sheriff as a servant girl. Another evidence in support of Ibsen's possible illegitimacy is the recollection of Ibsen's friend and confidant while an apprenticeship in Grimstad, Christopher Due, to whom Ibsen had spoken, albeit with bitterness, of the details of his illegitimate origins.

Ibsen's suspected illegitimacy is not the only problem that kept haunting the memory of this great dramatist. His irresponsible love affair with a servant girl at the Apothecary's house in Grimstad made him a father of an illegitimate child and caused him to pay maintenance fees for fourteen years, despite his abject impecuniosity. This happened in 1846, when the poet was only eighteen years old. The girl was ten years his senior.

### **Heredity**

Another theme rampant in Ibsen's plays which seems to stem from his personal experience is heredity. Despite the fact that doctors of his days rejected the theory of veneral heredity as perceived in Osvald Alving, Ibsen still makes a point of heredity and seems to maintain that one inherits either intelligence or disease from his parents, or at least one of his parents. This heredity theme is also seen in *The Wild Duck* where Hedvig was in danger of being blind as a result of ophthalmic disease.

It is significant that Hedvig is the real name of Ibsen's sister who, as Heiberg maintains, was the only sister of Ibsen's with whom he was on speaking terms. Not that

such coincidences are not possible in life as in art, but it is certainly significant and quite appropriate to this discussion. Of further significance is the fact that *Ghosts* appeared at the time when there were arguments as to where Ibsen inherited his creativity from. Many Norwegians believed that Knud Ibsen was not intelligent enough to beget such a creative child. It was later concluded that since Ibsen's suspected biological father was a Telemark poet and Parliamentarian of genius, there was no wonder from where Ibsen inherited his intelligence and creativity. Ibsen's theory of heredity in his plays tends to confirm this conclusion. Also Ibsen had admitted, on interview with Edgar O. Achorn of *New England Magazine* that *Ghosts* was written "to emphasize the influence of heredity."<sup>9</sup>

It is my belief, therefore, that a reading of Ibsen's plays is like being initiated into the quintessence of his past. His plays are no documentary or factual recordings of the past, but the past obviously stands at the root of his writing and makes his themes universal, even eternal, thus awaking different kinds of emotions on the hearts of his audiences.

### **Ibsen's Philosophy**

It is necessary to examine, at this juncture, Ibsen's philosophy which, I believe, will help to clarify his views regarding the marriage of art and life. Ibsen admitted on interview with a correspondent of *Era* on April 18, 1891, that people have tended to discover things in his writing which he never thought of when he wrote. In the same interview, he further explored the labyrinths of his art. He stated that "when I bring people on stage I have perhaps – I think I can say in most cases – met these people in real life."<sup>10</sup>

It is not unusual for a creative writer to bring in characters he has encountered in real life and give them a different significance in a play. But it is obvious that Ibsen sometimes uses real characters and places them in the same situations as these which he perceived them in real life. And where this appears in his plays, it obtrudes. Michael Egan has observed that

Ibsen is never tired of insisting that all his writing – even his romantic plays – stand in intimate relation to his own life. 'I have never,' he declares, 'written anything merely because, as the saying goes, I had 'hit on a good subject...' Everything he has produced, has its origin in something he has not merely experienced (oplevelt) but lived through (gennemlevet). Perhaps he is here repeating in another form the definition of poetry as 'emotion recollected in tranquility'; but this seems scarcely consistent with an idea he more than once repeats, that poetic production purges the system of fermenting elements which would become poisonous if not expelled."<sup>11</sup>

### **Ibsen's Art: A lucid examination**

From the foregoing, one notices that what Ibsen does is to have actual people in mind when he prepares his scenario. He takes situations into which these actual people were thrown: their behaviour, manner of speech, gait, manner of dressing and other

idiosyncracies, and matches them with a particular conflict which he wants to explore. The people could be members of his family, friends and acquaintances. The situation could be the one he has lived through, or the one his friends or relatives have encountered sometime or another in their lives. To support this argument, an exploration of some of Ibsen's family plays is paramount. In *Peer Gynt*, for instance, Ibsen recalls the painful experience of his impregnation of the servant maid. Halvdan Koht, in *Life of Ibsen*, recalls that "unquestionably, he (Ibsen) draws on this painful experience when he describes how the greenclad troll woman brings Peer Gynt their bastard child."<sup>12</sup> Henrik Ibsen himself admitted that the poem contains a great deal about his life. His father is portrayed as Jon Gynt, while his mother is Asa, Peer Gynt's mother. P.F.D. Tennant concludes that Ibsen's mother

Is the prototype of the self-effacing woman who appears again and again in Ibsen's work, first with Inga in *The Pretenders* and Ase in *Peer Gynt*, while the type occurs for the last time with Ella Renthein in John Gabriel Borkman. The father is alluded to as the old ragamuffin Jon Gynt, but is treated for the first time with full objectivity and humour in the figure of Old Ekdal in *The Wild Duck* in 1884, when Ibsen was fifty-six. Oswald's outburst against filial piety in *Ghosts* three years before is an instance of the way in which the family situation still rankled in Ibsen's memory. It is astounding that his childhood should exercise such a strong influence over him as a grown man, but his life is a remarkable instance of a man's incapacity to grow up owing to early emotional reverses which are not overcome in later life.<sup>13</sup>

In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen used Laura Kieler as a model for Nora. Ibsen scholars believe that Laura herself knew that she was the person being personalized in Nora. It is also believed that Ibsen had, before writing the play, used the term "a doll's house" to describe Nora's home. For Nora's husband, Ibsen used his Norwegian friend living in Munich as a model. His name was Helmer, and he was said to have used iron-hand to rule his German born wife.

In *Ghosts*, Ibsen used the Chief Officer of the Norwegian Ministry of Church and Education as a model and caricatures his fiendish and hypocritical attitude in the character of Pastor Manders. At the time of writing this play, the Norwegian Ministry of Church and Education had informed Ibsen's son, Sigurd, that he would not take the law degree unless he first passed a lower degree called the "second examination." This had infuriated Ibsen, and he decried the Ministry's obstinacy. Ibsen based his model for Regina on the German maid he had while in Munich. The girl was described as very pretty, liked to play the lady, and was always in the habit of showing off her few scraps of the French language she had learned.

In *An Enemy of the People*, the main model Ibsen used in creating the character of



Dr. Stockmann was the father of his friend, Meissner. Meissner, like Ibsen, was a writer. His father was a medical doctor who was practicing medicine in Teplitz in Bohemia in the 1890s. This unfortunate doctor was declared a public enemy and stoned because he was said to have “ruined the resort’s season by pointing out that there was cholera in the town.”<sup>14</sup>

Almost all the characters in Ibsen’s plays have real persons from whom they created and in most of them, the incidents the persons encountered in real life have been injected into the action of the plays and in a number of cases, serving as the conflict of the plays. It is evident, therefore, that what Russel and Standing<sup>15</sup> refer to as ‘absurdities’ in Ibsen’s plays are obviously the great poet’s effort to recapitulate events and people of his past, thus succeeding in showing us how temporarily we fare in prosperity and how finally we encounter problems and thus decline to ignominy and melancholy.

## Conclusion

From the foregoing, we have noticed that the recollection of the past serves as a motivating force that inspires Ibsen to write. Inspiration is a latent force in the mind of a creative writer and this inspiration is not enough until it is harvested and applied to achieve the ultimate. Ibsen had a lot of experiences which he had lived through and he was able to explore these experiences in his writing.

Many writers have, one time or another, demonstrated the irresistible quality of mind that helps to advance their creativity. Playwright Jean Cocteau<sup>16</sup> does not believe that inspiration falls from heaven. She opines that to write down a piece of idea when it strikes the writer is far better than carrying it in mind without giving it out to be enjoyed by the literary world. This seems to support Ibsen’s art, even if this inspiration is the recollection of past experiences, especially as lack of inspiration has been used by many creative writers as an alibi if they feel too lazy to write, or if they suffer creative incapacitation. William Wordsworth believes that poetry is a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling,” and tends to suggest that good poetry has been produced mainly by men who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had subjected it to long and deep thoughts. Mathematician, Henri Poincare, believes that the most striking thing about inspiration is “the appearance of sudden illumination, a manifest sign of long, unconscious prior work.”<sup>17</sup> In the case of Ibsen this prior work is his experiences. The marriage of these experiences and dramatic art without authorial intrusion makes his plays lucid and universal.

Henrik Ibsen insists that the experiences of the past can form an influential inspiration to the present, even when the writer also uses his medium as a catharsis to purge the experiences from his own mind. In this way, he draws inspiration from the past, communicates the experiences to us in the form of drama and helps the reader to learn not only about the past but also possibilities for improving the future.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>P.F.D. Tennant, *Ibsen’s Dramatic Technique* (New York: The Humanities Press, 1965), pp 20-21.

<sup>2</sup>George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (New York: Brentano's Press, 1913), p.108. For more on the influence of the past in portraying characters in Ibsen's plays, see Gay Gibson Cima, "Discovering Signs: The Emergence of the Critical Actor in Ibsen", *Theatre Journal* 35, 1 (March 1983), pp 5-22.

<sup>3</sup>Tennant, p.24.

<sup>4</sup>Shaw, p.96.

<sup>5</sup>Michael Egan, ed., *Ibsen: The Critical Heritage* (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p.88.

<sup>6</sup>Tennant, pp 24-25.

<sup>7</sup>Hans Heiberg, *Ibsen: A Portrait of the Artist* (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami press, 1967), p.22.

<sup>8</sup>Heiberg, p.22.

<sup>9</sup>Egan, p.333.

<sup>10</sup>Egan, p.215.

<sup>11</sup>Egan, p.424.

<sup>12</sup>Jalvdan Koht, *Life of Ibsen* (New York: Benjamin Bloom Inc., 1971), p.38.

<sup>13</sup>Tennant, p.24.

<sup>14</sup>Heiberg, p.220.

<sup>15</sup>Edward R. Russell and Percy Cross Standing, *Ibsen on His Merits* (London: Kennikat Press, 1897), p.22.

<sup>16</sup>Jean Cocteau, "The Process of Inspiration," in *Brewster Ghiselin, ed., The Creative Process* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), pp 81-82.

<sup>17</sup>Henri Poincare, "Mathematical Creation," in *Brewster Ghiselin, ed., The Creative Process*, p.38.

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