**Henrik Ibsen’s *Ghosts***

* **Theme of *Ghosts***

As if to answer the hosts of critics who denounced the "vulgar untruths" they discovered in *A Doll's House*, Ibsen developed another facet of the same idea when he published *Ghosts*two years later.

According to Halvdan Koht, one of his biographers, "Mrs. Alving is in reality nothing but a Nora who has tried life and her inherited teachings and who has now taken a stand." Having sacrificed love for conformity, Mrs. Alving must face the tragic consequences of denying her personal needs.

In essence, the problems Ibsen probes in *A Doll's House*are the same as those of *Ghosts:*the relation between past and future, and the relationship between the race and community on one hand, and the individual on the other. Society perpetuates itself by handing down from one generation to another a set of beliefs and customs so that new individuals can take part in the culture and contribute to its perpetuation. Ibsen, however, shows how these principles may degenerate until they actually destroy the very individuals that the social system is created to protect and nurture. He insists that these "ghosts" of old beliefs and outdated piety must be reexamined in the light of each individual's experience; if not, the most gifted of society's children will face destruction.

Having himself suffered all his life under the conservatism of Norwegian provincialism, Ibsen personally found how such a society destroys the "joy of life" in its creative intellects leaving bitterness and frustration.

* **Structure and Technique in *Ghosts***

As in most of Ibsen's problem plays, *Ghosts*begins at the collective climax in the lives of its characters. The play deals only with the consequences of these past lives and does not need to take place in more than one twenty-four hour vigil. Although the relationships among the characters are close and lifelong, only the crowding of emotions and events within these three acts forces each one to face the truth about himself and about his society.

Unlike *A Doll's House,*where there are servants and a sub-plot between Krogstad and Mrs. Linde, only five characters appear in *Ghosts.*No one is included who has not a place in the main action itself. In this way, an atmosphere of austere grandeur is given to the whole drama providing it with an intensity suggestive of classical plays. Professor Koht describes the play's further relationship to ancient drama for Greek tragedy, often called the fate, or family drama, shows a tragic flaw inherited through the generations. *Ghosts*is also a "family tragedy," he writes, "but it is also a social drama — the ancient tragedy resurrected on modern soil."

Captain Alving's character bears this out. The source of the hereditary flaw which destroys his children, his presence pervades each scene of *Ghosts.*As each living character illuminates the nature of the diseased profligate, he finally stands as clearly and as well-drawn to the audience as if he were constantly active on stage. Almost as a "secondary" protagonist, Alving undergoes a change of character until he is presented to the spectator as an individual whom society has wronged. Finally, when Mrs. Alving recognizes how she destroyed his "joy of life," the dead husband is no longer a ghost, but a humanized victim of the social conventions.

* **Symbols in *Ghosts***

Ibsen's poetic ability enables him to enrich the prose plays with symbols that have broad as well as narrow meanings. Especially allusive is Ibsen's concept of light and darkness. Oswald's last plea for the sun, for instance, sums up his need for the "joy of life" in himself as well as in his work. He needs sunlight in which to paint and he needs illumination on the nature of his father. A pall hangs over the entire landscape of the play; if there is no rain at the moment, the scene outside the window is obscured by mist. The weather finally clears when Mrs. Alving faces the truth, but it is too late. Thrust into darkness, Oswald weakly cries out for the sun. His last monosyllabic plea has a twofold significance: not only symbolizing the "light of truth," it might stand for the morphia powders which would dispel the lingering darkness that enshrouds Oswald's diseased mind.

The fire that destroys the orphanage is another symbol of truth. Purifying the institution of deceit, the flames allow Engstrand to receive support for his planned Alving Home. With characteristic irony, Ibsen implies that there is no deceit in raising a brothel to the memory of the late Captain Alving.

The most pervasive symbol, of course, is that of ghosts. The ghosts are worn ideals and principles of law and order so misapplied that they have no actual significance. All the untested maxims and abstract dogma that Manders maintains are ghosts; all the sources of personal cowardice in Mrs. Alving are ghosts. Ghosts are also the lies about the past, perpetrated to the present, which will haunt the future. Finally, ghosts are the actual and symbolic diseases of heredity which destroy the joy of life in the younger, freer generations.

* **Study of the Characters in *Ghosts***

**Character Analysis: Mrs. Alving**

Mrs. Alving, raised as a dutiful girl to become a dutiful wife and mother, would easily fall in love with the virtuous Manders. Certainly a man with Alving's exuberance and vitality would not be a suitable husband for her. However, desperate circumstances forced Mrs. Alving to reassess the values she was brought up to maintain. Suffering her hard life with Alving, taking over his business, reading and thinking for herself revitalized her static intellect. By the end of the play she is able to recognize that her sanctimoniousness contributed to perverting Alving's joy of life into lechery and drunkenness. This final awakening comes too late: The ghosts of her past education have already destroyed the children in her care, Regina and Oswald.

What makes Mrs. Alving such an interesting character is her inability to take a stand between keeping up appearances and acting out of personal integrity. At the same time she reads controversial literature and regrets the deceit in her past life, she dedicates a town orphanage to preserve the reputation of her dead husband. Although encouraging Oswald to study art and educating Regina to be a gentlewoman, she raises her son to idealize his father and never tells Regina the facts of her origins. No longer deceiving herself as to the truth of Manders' pious generalizations, Mrs. Alving instills these same "ghosts" into the beliefs of her children.

In another sense, the personal tension in Mrs. Alving is based on her imposed feminine weaknesses in a society where only men expect to express themselves aggressively and self-confidently. In this way, Ibsen recalls the feminist sympathy he expressed in *A Doll's House*, and depicts another tragedy where a woman finally asserts her own individuality and intellect after catastrophe.

**Character Analysis: Oswald Alving**

Oswald Alving, although important in the play, is merely a minor character and represents the doomed product of a diseased society. Artistically gifted by having inherited his father's "joy of life" he finds he cannot work at home where the "sun" of self-expression is obscured by the "fog" of duty and social appearances. Fearing that his exuberance and creativity would dissipate, like that of his father, under these circumstances, he wants to leave home with Regina. However Oswald is doomed by a more drastic form of hereditary dissipation; he ends his life in hopeless lunacy, crying vainly for the sun — the symbolic sun of truth, love, and self-expression that he never found among his own people.

**Character Analysis: Regina**

Regina Engstrand is another victim of society's "ghosts" which destroy the "joy of life" in its female members. Limited by her sex and status, she is unable to channel this vitality into a constructive mode of life. Unable to marry into another social level, Regina has no resources with which to face her future other than her own good looks and spirited temperament.

**Character Analysis: Jacob Engstrand**

Jacob Engstrand, made cynical by his experiences as a member of the lower class, preys upon the established society for his maintenance. Using the same tools of hypocrisy and deceit that Pastor Manders accepts as social principles, Engstrand gains in power and prestige. He personifies how Manders' pious idealism degenerates into ruthless self-interest when social principles are applied to denounce individual integrity.

**Character Analysis: Pastor Manders**

Pastor Manders, simple-minded and self-involved like Torvald Helmer, exists in an imaginary world where people and events conform to his stereotypes. Depositions such as "It is not a wife's part to be her husband's judge" and "We have no right to do anything that will scandalize the community" show how he accepts all the verbal expressions of social principles but is unable to deal with instances where doctrine does not apply. When he states, for instance, "A child should love and honor his father and mother," Mrs. Alving tartly replies, "Don't let us talk in such general terms. Suppose we say: ought Oswald to love and honor Mr. Alving?" To this conflict of principle and reality which she suggests, the reverend has no response. Hypocritical and prideful, Manders' only reaction to the story of Joanna's scandalous marriage to Engstrand is indignation that he was fooled.

Because of the power that his clerical status accords him, Manders is the most destructive creature in the drama. Incapable of spontaneity, devoid of any intellect, he readily sacrifices individual integrity and freedom of expression to maintain empty social standards. The major incident in a life devoted to hypocrisy occurred when Manders persuaded Mrs. Alving to return to her husband. Delighted to show the world his victory over temptation, he neglected Mrs. Alving's plight. His indifference to the needs of the individual sacrificed the love of a sensitive young woman and doomed her to lifelong despair. Although he is a believable figure in the present play, Manders is too much a stereotype. He speaks for all of society and represents its evil