

Introduction to GHOSTS

Title

'The title *Ghosts*', writes Eric Bentley, 'is a much better guide to the play than any discussion of syphilis'.¹ However, it is worth remembering that the word 'Ghosts' is used here not in its literal sense (i.e., 'spirit of a dead person, appearing to somebody still living') as in Shakespeare's plays.² It has nothing in common with the ghosts of Hamlet's father, Julius Caesar or Banquo, all of whom are represented as spirits of dead persons appearing to some living character. Ibsen employs it here as a symbol 'whose significance spreads over the whole play'.³

The title 'Ghosts' suggests not only the continuing influence of a dead father over his son—discernible in the latter's hereditary disease and life-style—but also dead old beliefs and ideas which continue to exert their impact on coming generations. When Mrs. Alving says that 'there is in me something ghostlike', she refers actually to the ghosts of outdated ideas—'all kinds of dead ideas and all sorts of old and obsolete beliefs'.

Ibsen has expressed almost the same view in a rhyming human predicament. Here is, for instance, a description of

1. *The Playwright as Thinker*, p. 98.
2. The original Norwegian title, *Gengangere*, means 'those who come back'. Ibsen was not happy with the English title 'Ghosts', which was given to it by its translator, William Archer.
3. Eric Bentley, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

letter written in 1875: 'I believe we are sailing with a corpse in our cargo'.⁴ In fact, the word 'ghosts' symbolizes here the very past—all that has happened in the past—which continues to haunt and condition the present.⁵ It carries also a sinister implication traditionally associated with the idea of a ghost. The continuing presence of the past is felt to be as ominous as the murky atmosphere that enwraps the action of the play.

It is this conception of 'ghosts' which gives the play its motive and force. 'Idea and action', writes Robert Brustein, 'are perfectly unified in the central image of the work'.⁶

Theme

Ghosts was published in December 1881, two years after the publication of *A Doll's House*. It follows the earlier play not only in time but also in theme. One cannot fail to notice that there are some important links between these two plays. To quote Edward Beyer, 'In Ibsen the inner continuity from work to work is often marked, but never more so than between *A Doll's House* and the work which followed'.⁷ The play, it is said, was written as a reply to those critics who found fault with Nora's leaving her husband and children.⁸ 'Ibsen', says Bernard Shaw, 'is determined to shew you what comes of a scrupulous line of conduct you were so angry with Nora for not pursuing'.⁹ The implication is that Oswald's tragedy is the result of Mrs. Alving's staying with her husband. This, of course, is one way of looking at the play—as a defence or justification of Nora's conduct in *A Doll's House*. There is

4. Cited, Martin Lamm, *Modern Drama*, tr. Karin Elliott, p. 116.

5. One of the sanskrit equivalents of the word 'ghost' is 'bhūta', which means both 'ghost' and 'the past'.

6. *The Theatre of Revolt*, p. 68.

7. *Ibsen: The Man and His Work*, tr. Marie Wells, pp. 122-23.

8. See Janko Lavrin, *Ibsen: An Approach*, p. 81.

9. 'The Quintessence of Ibsenism', *Major Critical Essays*, p. 67.

also another view—equally valid—which regards it as a continuation of the earlier play. For instance, H. Koht observes: 'As *A Doll's House* grew naturally out of *Pillars of Society*, so *Ghosts* proceeded even more naturally from *A Doll's House*'.¹⁰ The subject of Dr. Rank's hereditary disease, which was only touched upon in the earlier play, is treated here as the central theme. As Peter Watts puts it, 'Oswald carries the problem of Dr Rank a stage further, while Mrs. Alving is a Nora who stayed at home'.¹¹

In spite of these obvious affinities, *Ghosts* differs markedly from *A Doll's House*. Its theme is not as simple and straightforward as that of the earlier play. It operates at more than one level of meaning. At least, there are three distinct planes at which the play may be read:

(I) *Sociological plane*: At its most explicit level, the play may be regarded as a social document, dealing with so-called indecent subjects like venereal disease, incest and mercy-killing—subjects which were considered taboos in Ibsen's time. As it is clear from their violent reactions,¹² most of Ibsen's contemporaries took the play at this plane.

(II) *Ideological plane*: The play may also be considered as a deliberate attempt at transposition of moral values—the substitution of a new morality for the old one. There is almost a complete reversal of the prevailing notions of good and evil: the traditional virtues are treated here as vices, and the traditional vices as virtues. The main thrust of the dramatic action consists in Mrs. Alving's discovery of 'how appallingly opportunities were wasted, morals perverted and instincts corrupted,

10. *The Life of Ibsen*, II, 158.

11. 'Introduction', *Ibsen: Ghosts and Other Plays* (Penguin Books, 1977), p. 10.

12. For a sample of contemporary reactions to *Ghosts*, see Bernard Shaw, *op. cit.*, pp. 70–71. Just to give an example, the play was dubbed 'An open drain', and Ibsen was called 'A teacher of the aestheticism of the Lock Hospital'.

not only—something not at all—by the vices she was taught to abhor in her youth, but by the virtues it was her pride and uprightiness to maintain'.¹³ She gradually realizes that it is she, not captain Alving, who is responsible for Oswald's tragedy. In the end, she seems to opt for the same morality that she had condemned earlier as a monstrous vice—'high spirits' or the joy of living (*livsgled*). It stands for a celebration of life in its totality, in its rawness as well as sublimity.

(III) *Metaphysical plane*: There is yet another level at which the play may be taken as a metaphysical inquiry into the human condition. Here Ibsen tries again to probe the question he had posed in *Brand* (Act II):

Where, O where, does guilt begin
In our heritage of sin?

He believes that the root of our present suffering lies in our past; it is our past which determines and shapes our present. This continuing and crippling effect of the past is represented in the play in two forms—hereditary disease and the sway of old beliefs and ideas. They are, of course, two facets of the same coin—the physical (biological) and the psychological aspects of the heritage from the past. But the latter, it seems, is given greater importance. In a speech (Act II) that looks like a gloss on the title of the play, Mrs. Alving asserts:

I almost think we are all ghosts—all of us, Pastor Manders. It isn't just what we have inherited from our father and mother that walks in us. It is all kinds of dead ideas and all sorts of old and obsolete beliefs. They are not alive in us; but they remain in us none the less, and we can never rid ourselves of them.

This notion of 'ghosts', it may be pointed out, anticipates much of what J. Krishnamurti calls 'conditioning'—the basic

13. Bernard Shaw, *Dramatic Opinions and Essays* (New York: Brentano's, 1928), II, 300.

'conditioning', which may very well serve as an illuminating commentary on Mrs. Alving's observation:

We are conditioned—physically, nervously, mentally—by the climate we live in and the food we eat, by the culture in which we live, by the whole of our social, religious and economic environment, by our experience, by education and by family pressures and influences. All these are the factors which condition us. Our conscious and unconscious responses to all the challenges of our environment—intellectual, emotional, outward and inward—all these are the action of conditioning.¹⁴

But Ibsen does not go as far as Krishnamurti. For him, 'conditioning' is confined only to obsolete ideas and beliefs one cannot get rid of. Like hereditary disease, they too, are a 'symbol of all determinist forces that crush humanity down'.¹⁵ But Ibsen's determinism, in spite of its apparent resemblance, is not identical with Greek fatalism. As Robert Brustein points out convincingly, it is rather the opposite of the Greek view:

Sophocles ascribes the destruction of his heroes to the will of the gods. Ibsen ascribes it to the stupidity and inhumanity of generation after generation of men. And so the implications of Ibsen's position are the very opposite of Greek fatalism; even his belief in determinism implies a 'belief' in will. For behind his conviction that mankind is on the wrong track is hidden his secret desire for a moral revolution through which mankind can once again be redeemed. Ibsen's task, in these realistic plays, is not to champion this revolution but rather to show the need for it by exposing the corpse that infects the cargo of modern life.¹⁶

14. J. Krishnamurti, *The Second Penguin Krishnamurti Reader*, ed. Marjorie Lutyens (Penguin Books, 1974), p. 277.
15. M. C. Bradbrook, *Ibsen the Norwegian*, p. 90.
16. *The Theatre of Revolt*, pp. 70-71.

However, there is no need to settle on any one particular interpretation, for it is the multiplicity of meaning, rather than any specific meaning, which contributes to the richness of the theme.

Plot-construction

The plot of *Ghosts* is woven of two distinct strands. The first, incorporating the elements of an intrigue play, consists of the preparation for inauguration of the Orphanage set up in the memory of Captain Irving, its destruction by a mysterious fire, and the consequent blackmailing of Pastor Manders by Engstrand. The second, a simple one, revolves round Oswald's disease—its origin, its nature, and its attack on him in the form of softening of his brain. Both these strands run parallel, and sometimes criss-cross each other (e.g., it is Oswald's exposure during his attempt to extinguish the fire that hastens the recurrence of his disease). They are linked together by the presence of the protagonist, Mrs. Alving, and her basic concern—to save her son from the sins of his father. Both the establishment of the Orphanage and the act of keeping Oswald away from the home are intended to protect him from the pernicious effects of his father's profligacy. But Mrs. Alving does not succeed in her intentions: the Orphanage is gutted by fire, and Oswald develops the signs of syphilis which ultimately undermines his sane life. She fails not only to exorcise the ghost of her husband but also the ghosts of outdated ideas and beliefs she thinks she has outgrown. The past proves inexorable and insurmountable.

The plot is relatively neatly constructed, for, as Robert Brustein says, it is 'no longer bothered by the noise of Scribean machinery'.¹⁷ There are no 'sensational reversals and uncon-

17. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

vincing conversions' such as we find in Ibsen's earlier plays. However, it still suffers from some awkward improbabilities and improprieties. For instance, Engstrand's implication of Pastor Manders in the burning of the Orphanage is not convincing. Why did he not, when he saw a smouldering candle being thrown into the shavings, extinguish or take it out? It looks also improbable that a man of Pastor Manders's character would accept such a preposterous accusation without demur, and help the accuser financially in setting up his vicious 'seamen's home'. In fact, the whole episode of blackmailing is irrelevant to the central theme of the play; it can be defended only on the ground that it reveals the shallowness of Manders's sententious morality.

Similarly, Ibsen's treatment of hereditary disease (here, syphilis), which forms the basis of the main plot, is open to objection. How is syphilis, one may ask, transmitted only to one child (Oswald) and not to the other child (Regina) or the mother (Mrs. Alving)? In the normal course it is the mother who transmits the disease, not the father. Again, one may ask, how could Mrs. Alving conceal her husband's licentiousness from the eyes of her neighbours continuously for eight or nine years? These are some of the matters that lack credibility.

There are also a few other things which, though not so improbable, look improper or misplaced. The discussion on the advisability of insuring the building of the Orphanage at the time of its inauguration is such a case. It violates the law of propriety or *auchitya* which Ksemendra, a Sanskrit critic, considers the very life-breath of a work.

On the whole, one may say that there is enough to support Ronald Gray's view that 'In naturalistic or realistic terms, the plot is naive'.¹⁸

However, one should not jump to the conclusion that the play fails because of these deficiencies. A play like *Hamlet*

18. *Ibsen—A Dissenting View*, p. 66.

can succeed in spite of its artistic weaknesses.¹⁹ The main interest of such plays lies in their theme, not in their machinery. Once the reader or spectator is drawn by a theme, he allows the work a measure of 'willing suspension of disbelief'. He is not bothered by improbabilities or logical inconsistencies so long as they do not interfere with the main sentiment or thought (*angi rasa*).

Seen in this light the plot of *Ghosts* is not altogether unsatisfactory. It does succeed in projecting its theme clearly and forcefully.

Characters

There are five characters in the play, which may be divided into two groups—major characters and minor characters. To the first group belong Mrs. Alving, Pastor Manders and Oswald Alving, while the second consists of Engstrand and Regina Engstrand. A brief analysis of all these characters is presented below:

Mrs. Alving

She is the protagonist, the so-called heroine of the play.²⁰

19. T. S. Eliot, in his famous essay on *Hamlet* (*The Sacred Wood*, 1964, pp. 95-103), condemns the play for its artistic drawbacks. Even V. Chatterjee, who rebuts Eliot's charge in an essay contributed to *Shakespeare: A Book of Homage* (Jadavpur University, 1965), cannot help admitting: 'It may be that the character of Hamlet is inconsistent when analysed logically. But it is a well-known fact that literature, like life, does not always conform to the principles of logic. Then, again, some contradictions and confusions are bound to occur in such a play as *Hamlet*'.

20. For a long time it was common to regard Oswald as the hero of the play, but now the critics have come round to the view that Mrs. Alving is the main character. 'Actually the real protagonist', writes Joseph W. Krutch, 'is not the helpless victim Oswald but his mother' (*Modernism in Modern Drama*, p. 40). See also Edvard Beyer, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

The whole play revolves round her 'struggle against the heritage from the past—spiritual as well as physical'.²¹ She tries as much to save her son from the evil effects of her husband's dissolute life as to free herself from the conventional beliefs and ideas in which she was brought up. But she does not succeed in her efforts. In spite of her modern magazines and books (to which Pastor Manders objects) and acquisition of new ideas, she is unable to reject the traditional values. As Eric Bentley says, 'new ideas are only in her head, while the ghosts of the old ideas linger in her heart'.²² Her violent reaction to Oswald's casual flirtation with Regina in the conservatory (Act I) amply supports this view. In fact, all her actions proceed from her concern for public opinion or her only son. Only once—when she runs away from her husband's home—she acts by her own light, but here, too, she fails to show any courage of conviction. Fear of public opinion forces her to return to her husband.

Though Mrs. Alving is represented as a champion of truth ('Yes, but what about the truth?', she asks Pastor Manders), she leads a life of deception and sham. Her attempt to found an orphanage in the memory of her husband whom she heartily detested is a glaring example of her hypocrisy. She reveals the truth only when the exigencies of a situation make it imperative. For instance, she tells the truth to Pastor Manders in order to defend her conduct, and to Oswald to save him from remorse and, possibly, from an incestuous marriage with Regina. Even her opting for the new ethic of 'the joy of life' (*livsglede*) seems to be motivated not by any deep realization but a doting mother's concern for her son's views. There is thus an air of insincerity about her which prevents her from attaining to a heroic stature.

21. H. Koht, *The Life of Ibsen*, II, 164.

22. *The Life of the Drama* (New York: Atheneum, 1961), p. 128.

Pastor Manders

He is the spokesman of old morality, of 'duty' (he uses this word several times) or 'ideals' ('Yes, but what about the ideals?', he asks Mrs. Alving). But despite his professed rectitude, he is a timorous fellow, extremely sensitive to public opinion. It is this weakness which prevents him from accepting the hand of Mrs. Alving, and later allows Engstrand to blackmail him. His behaviour with Engstrand shows that he is not only a poor judge of people but also gullible and childish (Mrs. Alving calls him 'a great baby'). His final decision to support the latter's proposed home for sailors—a kind of brothel—makes a mockery of all his teachings. One begins to doubt whether his morality is just an eye-wash.²³

Oswald Irving

His role in the play is that of a catalyst. He is not so much important in himself as the dramatic functions he serves. His hereditary disease forms the central theme of the play. It is he who makes Mrs. Alving realize the hollowness of her morals, and forces on her the tragic dilemma of poisoning the one whom she loves above everything else. It is he, not Mrs. Alving, who presents a contrast to Pastor Manders's ideology. He is truly unconventional, broad-minded and liberal. His philosophy of 'joy of life' leads Mrs. Alving not only to revise her thinking but also to look at her treatment of Captain Alving in a new light.

Engstrand

He is the villain of the play. His physical deformity is a symbol

23. Cf. R. E. Roberts (*Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Study*, p. 118): 'In Ibsen's work there is perhaps nothing subtler than the way in which he shows that Pastor Manders is really responsible not only for Oswald's birth, but also for the lying struggle to keep up appearances, for the atmosphere of deceit in which Oswald had been reared, and for the consequences of that atmosphere on Mrs. Alving and on Oswald'.

of his mental crookedness. He is selfish, cunning and calculating. Unlike Pastor Manders, he is a shrewd judge of people, and knows how to handle them. Though illiterate, he is quite clever in conversation and argument, and an adept in the art of simulation. He has certainly more intelligence than Pastor Manders whom he easily blackmails.

Regina Engstrand

She is the illegitimate daughter of Captain Alving, but the fact of her true parentage is kept secret till the very end of the play. Publicly, she is known as the daughter of Engstrand with whom her mother was legally married. She is beautiful, healthy and strong—full of the joy of life. It is this quality which attracts Oswald. She is contrasted with Mrs. Alving whose 'genial current of the soul' has been chilled in her very youth. However, she, like Engstrand, is extremely selfish, and leaves Oswald when she learns about his incurable illness.

In the play she serves a double purpose; she provides a proof of Captain Alving's escapades, and presents a living picture of what Oswald calls the 'joy of life'.

Dramatic technique and style

Ghosts is constructed on the pattern of a Greek tragedy, specially *Oedipus Rex* or *Oedipus the King* of Sophocles. 'The technique of *Oedipus Rex*', says Martin Lamm, 'has never been used so wholeheartedly as here'.²⁴ It begins, like the Greek play, after the actual catastrophe has taken place; Oswald is a broken man before he enters the stage. We do not see here, as in a Shakespearean tragedy like *Macbeth*, the development of events leading the protagonist to a disaster; rather we see him just suffering the consequences of something that has happened in the past. However, the play differs from the

24. *Modern Drama*, p. 130.

Sophoclean tragedy in two respects. First, it represents Mrs. Alving, not the supposed hero Oswald, bearing the tragic consequences of the past. Secondly, Ibsen, unlike Sophocles, does not relax the tension of the play, leaving us wondering what happens after the curtain falls. Brander Matthews demonstrates this difference diagrammatically as follows:²⁵

*Oedipus Rex**Ghosts*

Ibsen employs here, as in his earlier plays, flash-back or retrospective technique: the past is revealed gradually and piecemeal. Naturally, there is more of narration than action in the play (The actual action consists in the burning of the orphanage and the final stroke of Oswald's illness). Ibsen does not proceed in a straight-forward manner but, like a detective story-teller, often breaks the thread of his story to prolong suspense. His favourite method is to end a scene just as an important statement is about to be made. For instance, in the First Act Mrs. Alving's narration of the real story of her husband and Regina's birth is intercepted by Oswald's flirtation with Regina, while in the Second Act it is the fire which prevents her from revealing their true relationship. Even at the

25. *A Study of the Drama* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910), p. 214.

end of the play our doubts are not resolved; we are not shown how Mrs. Alving reacts to her son's request to poison him.

What is remarkable about Ibsen is that he makes his tragic revelations at a time when everything seems all right. When Mrs. Alving in the Second Act says: 'From the day after tomorrow, it will be as if the dead has never lived in this house', the very moment the ghost of the dead strikes her in the form of Oswald's flirtation with Regina. Similarly, in the Last Act when she feels the crisis is over, Oswald is struck with the cruel disease. Such a skilful use of the irony of fate helps in deepening the tragic sense of the play.

The play is also notable for its strict adherence to the 'unities'. All the scenes take place on Mrs. Alving estate, almost in the same room. The action is spread over a period of less than twenty-four hours. It opens with Engstrand's observation—'the day's half gone', and closes with the stage-direction: 'The sun rises, and snow-capped peaks in the background glitter in the morning light'. The unity of action, too, is rigorously preserved; the whole play is pervaded with an unremitting gloom. Even Ibsen's caustic *Galgenhumer*, as Janko Lavrin points out, is used here 'not as a relief, but as a further thickening of the gloom'.²⁶ Such an observance of the unities lends the theme both unity and intensity.

This intensity of impression is further strengthened by the symbolic use of the natural background. It is used both as a parallel and as a contrast. The unceasing rain which suggests the idea of dampness and confinement is an example of the first while the rising of the sun at the end of the play, when the sun of Oswald's mental faculties is setting, is an example of the second kind of natural symbolism. In both cases, the sense of tragedy is heightened.

There are also other symbols such as Engstrand's crooked leg or 'an empty garden syringe' in Regina's hands.²⁷ In fact,

26. *Ibsen: An Approach*, pp. 83-4.

27. These symbols have been explained in the 'Notes'.

the use of symbols is part of Ibsen's larger design of conveying his meaning through suggestion rather than statement. In his close reading of the play, John Northam shows clearly how 'visual suggestion' plays a vital role in revealing the obscure side of a character or situation.²⁸ To this we may add also 'verbal suggestion' which, though not so pervasive, serves the same purpose. We find an example of both the modes of suggestion at the very beginning of the play. Engstrand's appearance as 'dripping wet' (visual image) and his comment that 'It is God's blessed rain' (verbal statement)—both suggest his association with external gloom. Another instance of verbal suggestion may be found in his later statement to Regina in reference to her mother: 'The Englishman—him with the yacht-fifty pounds he paid out—and she wasn't any prettier than you'. It suggests not only his attempt to lure Regina into accepting his offer but also his complete disregard of moral values. There is thus a substratum of unstated meanings which adds greatly to the texture of play. As Martin Lamm observes, the terrifying impression that the play creates 'is the result of what is said, and even more of the implication behind what is said'.²⁹