

### **GHOSTS as a social play**

As we have seen earlier, *Ghosts* is a social or problem play. But its social problem is not as obvious as that of Ibsen's earlier play, *A Doll's House*, or Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. Ronald Gray thinks that the play, in its specific content, 'is about the advisability of an incestuous marriage at a particular time and place'.<sup>39</sup> But, as he himself admits, this question is neither discussed nor presented in a social context: 'the audience is left unaware of the serious arguments which may

28. See *Ibsen's Dramatic Method* (1953), pp. 59-75. Some of his remarks have been incorporated into the 'Notes'.

29. *Op. cit.*, p. XIX.

30. *Ibsen—A Dissenting View*, p. 71.

be put on either side'.<sup>31</sup> In this respect, the play contrasts with H. Granville-Barker's *Waste*, where there is a full-fledged discussion of the consequences of the death of a young woman during an abortion. Another critic, Eric Bentley, seems to suggest that the play is concerned with the problem of hereditary syphilis.<sup>32</sup> But this problem, too, is just taken for granted; there is no attempt to explore its social implications.

One may also hold that the play is designed to show the inadvisability of traditional marriages; it depicts the evil consequences of marrying for wealth or status rather than love. But this subject, too, is not treated seriously. Not only does Mrs. Alving accept the role of a traditional wife but there is also nothing to prove that Oswald's disease is the necessary outcome of a traditional marriage. Hereditary disease is an individual phenomenon which need not be associated with any social custom.

In fact, as the title of the play indicates, *Ghosts* is not essentially a social or problem play. Its main interest lies in exploring a problem which is metaphysical rather than social: the dead hand of the past strangling the present. True, Ibsen does throw up some social problems, but they are treated only peripherally. He seems to be more interested in his past than the contemporary social ethos. 'In this play', says M. C. Bradbrook, 'his own past, the ghost of his life in Norway, rules Ibsen'.<sup>33</sup>

### **GHOSTS as a drama of ideas**

*Ghosts*, as we have noted, may also be taken as a drama of ideas. But in this form, too, it does not prove successful. Unlike Shaw, Ibsen fails to provide a stimulating debate on any issue. His dialogues, as Raymond Williams says, 'do not represent a "living confrontation between actual people"; but

31. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

32. See *The Life of the Drama*, p. 228.

33. *Ibsen the Norwegian*, p. 92.

are rather straight single declaration'.<sup>34</sup> One idea is not pitted against another idea as we find in Shaw's plays.<sup>35</sup> This will be clear if we compare the dialogue between Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving with that of Morell's with Marchbanks in *Candida*. Whereas Mrs. Alving's arguments do not affect Manders's way of thinking, those of Marchbanks shake the very foundations of Morell's self-complacency. In fact, there is hardly any confrontation of ideas in *Ghosts*, for Mrs. Alving, who represents unorthodox thinking in the play, is not only intellectually immature but also haunted by the ghosts of old beliefs and ideas.

It seems that Ibsen did not intend *Ghosts* to be a play of ideas. Both his deterministic conception of the theme and the retrospective method do not allow any scope for dialectic approach which forms the basis of the drama of ideas. Here he appears to be obsessed with the burden of the past which he wants to throw off but can't. The play, with all its modernism, looks back to the Greek drama which it closely resembles in its theme and execution. It is, as Joseph Wood Krutch observes 'simply shocking rather than in any profound intellectual sense revolutionary'.<sup>36</sup>

### **GHOSTS as a tragedy**

'Few', says Brander Matthews, 'would be disposed today to deny the term (tragedy) to the sombre *Ghosts* of Ibsen'.<sup>37</sup> But still there is no dearth of critics who refuse to recognize it as a tragedy. M. C. Bradbrook, for instance, says that '*Ghosts* is not a tragedy but a nightmare, with the heightened repetition and re-echoing of a dream, the ingenious logical dove-

34. *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, p. 77.

35. For instance, Marchbanks in *Candida* (Act I) says: 'I am not afraid of a clergyman's ideas, I'll fight your ideas. I'll rescue her from her slavery to them. I'll pit my own ideas against them'.

36. 'Modernism' in *Modern Drama*, p. 9.

37. *Op. cit.*, p. 116.

tailoring of schizophrenia'.<sup>38</sup> But this statement, as well as what she adds, indicates clearly that her remarks have been prompted by her mistake of considering Oswald as the tragic hero and are thus largely ill-founded. But it will not be so easy to brush aside Janko Lavrin's objections, which seem to rest on a firmer ground. 'Mrs. Alving', he asserts, 'may be one of Ibsen's tragic heroines, yet the play as a whole remains more pessimistic than tragic'.<sup>39</sup> His main argument is that the play posits a kind of 'hopeless determinism' which renders all striving useless: 'A tragedy, however, catastrophic, makes one affirm life in spite of all. Here, on the contrary, we cannot get rid of the notion that mankind has actually failed beyond repair'.<sup>40</sup> But this view, too, is not entirely correct. For one thing, determinism or fatalism is not irreconcilable with the concept of tragedy. In fact it is an essential attribute of Greek tragedy and, as George Steiner points out, lies at the root of all tragic experience: 'necessity is blind and man's encounter with it shall rob him of his eyes, whether it be in Thebes or in Gaza. The assertion is Greek and the tragic sense of life built upon it is the foremost contribution of the Greek genius to our legacy'.<sup>41</sup> Secondly, Ibsen's determinism, as shown earlier, is fundamentally different from Greek fatalism; it implies, rather than denies, a belief in will and struggle. 'Ibsen's heroes', to quote Raymond Williams, 'characteristically die fighting and struggling and climbing: the aspiration to light is confirmed, not contradicted by their deaths'.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, Lavrin's charge that the play does not provide any *catharsis*<sup>43</sup> holds no water. To quote Joseph Wood Krutch,

38. *Op. cit.*, p. 90.

39. *Ibsen: An Approach*, p. 84.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

41. *The Death of Tragedy*, p. 5.

42. *Modern Tragedy*, p. 99.

43. *Op. cit.*, pp. 84-5.

... The fundamental error of all previous conception of the nature of tragedy lay in its avowed intention to 'purge the soul'. Such an intention... could only be voiced in a society devoted to maintaining a status quo. To purge the soul, to relieve it of its stress, is to promote an acquiescence in things as they are. The modern drama, on the contrary, is revolutionary in its purpose. It does not want to purge the soul but to burden it to the point when it will rebel against things as they are.<sup>44</sup>

It is this difference which we notice between a modern play like Hauptmann's *The Weavers* and an old play like Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

Another critic, Alan Reynolds Thompson, denies *Ghosts* the title of tragedy on the ground that there is no heroic character in it.<sup>45</sup> His view, obviously, is based on the assumption that a tragedy is not possible without heroic characters. But this very assumption is belied by the presence of bourgeois or domestic tragedies like George Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731) or Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman* (1949)—the tragedies that feature common people and commonplace situations. A final death-blow to this notion of tragedy has been dealt by the emergence of the anti-hero in recent plays like those of Samuel Beckett.

In fact, all these critics are guided in their judgments either by Aristotelian or Shakesperian conceptions of tragedy. They overlook the basic fact of tragic experience which consists in the feeling of what Lady Macbeth (*Macbeth*, III, 2) calls 'Nought's had, all's spent'. This realization of the futility of one's endeavour lies at the heart of all successful tragedies. And this is also true of *Ghosts*. Mrs. Alving comes to realize the uselessness of her efforts in the face of the onset of Oswald's disease. She is placed in one of the cruelest of tragic situations. She has not only to watch the end of a life she had so fondly

44. *Op. cit.*, p. 115.

45. *The Anatomy of Drama*, p. 297.

cherished but also to serve an instrument of its ending. Perhaps there could be no harsher punishment for a human being, death looks like a blessing in comparison with it. And Ibsen lets the curtain drop without relenting the tension. The audience leaves the theatre, not having the 'calm of mind, all passion spent' but with a feeling of disquiet that continues to haunt him for days together.