

Ibsen and the social drama

As *Ghosts* is usually classed with Ibsen's so-called social plays,³³ it is necessary to discuss the nature and scope of Ibsen's experiment with the social drama.

Among Ibsen's social plays are included *The League of Youth* (1869), *Pillars of Society* (1877), *A Doll's House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), and *An Enemy of the People* (1882). They proved the most influential of Ibsen's plays,³⁴ and established him as a great social reformer and moral teacher. 'This is the Ibsen', writes Eric Bentley, 'that scandalized Europe, the Ibsen that chimed with the Zolaist temper of the younger generation, the Ibsen of the *avant-garde* theatres of the nineties,

32. *Ibsen the Norwegian*, p. 2.

33. Though, as I have shown later ('*Ghosts as a Social Play*'), *Ghosts* is not basically a social play.

34. George Steiner (*The Death of Tragedy*, p. 297) observes: 'Where Ibsen has been influential, as in the case of Shaw, it is the programmatic plays that have counted, not the harrowing dramas of his maturity'.

the Ibsen, in a word, of Ibsenism, championed by Bernard Shaw for its positive values in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, and satirized by Bernard Shaw for the less sincere goings-on of its adherents in his first original comedy, *The Philanderer*.³⁵

In these plays Ibsen deals with contemporary social issues such as the position of women (*A Doll's House*), the taboo subjects like venereal disease and incest (*Ghosts*), the hypocrisies of middle-class gentility (*Pillars of Society*), or a community's incapacity to face the truth (*An Enemy of the People*). The plays follow the outward form of a 'well made' play, but depart from it in their attempt to offer credible, original characters and a serious view of society. In this respect Ibsen was, to some extent, influenced by the Danish scholar, Georg Brandes (1842-1927), who had exhorted him to take up the questions affecting the lives of ordinary men and women, and submit them to debate.³⁶ It is, in fact, of these plays that Shaw's famous statement is specifically true:

Shakespeare had put ourselves on the stage but not our situations. Our uncles seldom murder our fathers, and cannot legally marry our mothers; we do not meet witches; our kings are not as a rule stabbed and succeeded by their stabbers; and when we raise money by bills we do not promise to pay pounds of our flesh. Ibsen supplies the want left by Shakespeare. He gives us not only ourselves, but ourselves in our situations. The things that happen to his stage figures are things that happen to us.³⁷

It should, however, be remembered that Ibsen was not the originator of 'social drama' (*drama sociale*), which was already made popular by the French dramatists Alexandre Dumas the Younger (1824-95) and Emile Augier (1820-89). In his own

35. *The Playwright as Thinker*, p. 92.

36. See Brian W., Downs, *Ibsen: The Intellectual Background*, p. 143.

37. 'The Quintessence of Ibsenism', *Major Critical Essays*, p. 144.

country he was preceded by Bjørnstjerne Björnson (1832-1910), whose plays like *The Newly-Weds* (1865) or *The Editor* (1874) were not only written in prose but raised also the questions of conduct applicable to many members of the public. Yet, as John Gassner points out, the main interest of Dumas, Augier and other pre-Ibsenite playwrights was 'to defend middle-class interests and morals. If 'ideas' functioned in their plays at all they were conventional ones'.³⁸ Ibsen, for the first time, turned the social drama into 'the drama of ideas'.³⁹ He questioned in these plays the settled ideals, beliefs, and opinions which governed the life of his society and its members. As Shaw puts it, 'The drama arises through a conflict of unsettled ideals rather than through vulgar attachments, rapacities, generousities, resentments, ambitions, misunderstandings, oddities and so forth as to which no moral question is raised'.⁴⁰

However, there is little justification for labelling these plays as 'thesis' (*pièce à thèse*), 'doctrinaire' or 'programmatic' plays. Ibsen does not offer any clear-cut solutions to, or remedies for, the evils he spotlights. Though many critics, like Shaw, have tried to codify his message, 'it turns out', as James W. McFarlane points out, 'that any generalization once made seems to demand reservation and qualification so drastic that the end result is little short of flat contradiction'.⁴¹ Even Shaw, who has written the most assertive book about Ibsen, disarmingly admits the folly of making any confident assertion

38. 'Shaw on Ibsen and the Drama of Ideas', *Ideas in the Drama*, edited by John Gassner, p. 85.

39. Vivian Mercier, in his paper on 'From Myth to Ideas—and Back', remarks: 'The drama of ideas ought really to be called the drama of ideals for it presents not one isolated idea pitted against another but a conflict of opposing world views or ideologies' (*Ideas in the Drama*, p. 46).

40. *Op. cit.*, p. 139.

41. *Ibsen and the Temper of Norwegian Literature*, p. 61.

about his work: 'The conflict is not between clear right and wrong: the villain is as conscientious as the hero, if not more so: in fact, the question which makes the play interesting (when it is interesting) is which is the villain and which the hero'.⁴² Ibsen himself has made it quite clear that his purpose was not to teach a lesson or propound a thesis. 'I do but ask', he declared, 'My call is not to answer'.⁴³ In fact, as J. Lavrin puts it succinctly, 'Ibsen's "ideas" are not those of a propagandist but of a seeker, who is on the look-out for the best artistic expression of truth "inherent" in life. They are those of a fighter, anxious to undermine—not as a preacher but again as artist—the old dead values which still continue to encumber, like ghosts, our lives'.⁴⁴

Had Ibsen aimed at using these plays merely as vehicles for his ideas, they would have by now become outdated.⁴⁵ For, their ideas are no longer striking or revolutionary.⁴⁶ But the fact that the plays still continue to hold our interest shows clearly that they have got more than topical or polemical significance. Concerned apparently with contemporary and transitory issues, they are, like all truly great plays, the works of universal significance and great artistic power. '... instead of pamphlets on feminine mentality, the nature of marriage, or the unnerving influence of the sea, Ibsen presented the world with such creations as Nora Helmer, Oswald and

42. *Op. cit.*, p. 139.

43. Cited, H. Koht, *The Life of Ibsen*, I, 4.

44. *Ibsen: An Approach*, p. 21.

45. J. M. Synge, reacting to Shavian Ibsenism, believed actually that Ibsen had become outdated. He writes in his preface to *The Tinker's Wedding* (1907): 'Analysts with their problems and teachers with their systems are soon as old fashioned as the pharmacopoeia of Gelsen—look at Ibsen and the Germans....'

46. H. L. Mencken maintains that Ibsen's ideas were not original or novel even in his own times. See his introduction to *Eleven Plays of Henrik Ibsen* (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.), pp. ix-x.

Mrs. Alving, and the morbidly maladjusted wife Ellida Wangel—all of them as clear-cut and concrete as they could be'.⁴⁷ In fact, the plays are more a triumph of dramatic art than of ideas.⁴⁸

These plays are also characterized as 'realistic' plays, but here, too, one has to remember that his realism is of a special kind. It is vitally different from the realism of the naturalistic writers like Emile Zola (1840-1902). As P. F. D. Tennant points out, 'Ibsen's realism, which gave the great impulse to the realist drama of modern times, always remained only an approximation to contemporary life, and never descended to the unpoetic drabness of the naturalistic school and that of his own numerous imitators'.⁴⁹ In fact, the charisma of his art lies in creating 'an illusion of realism', for Ibsen, as Eric Bentley asserts, 'remained to the end an arch-romanticist'.⁵⁰ 'He may depict scenes of middle-class life, but the creatures who inhabit these scenes are not of the middle range of humanity. When we think of them we think of human beings *possessed*'.⁵¹ Beneath the realistic surface of contemporary characters, contemporary dialogue and a contemporary indoor setting, there lurks the world of 'the trolls and devils of *Peer Gynt*, that is to say, the trolls and devils of Norse folk tales'.⁵² Perhaps the best description of Ibsen's realism

47. Janko Lavrin, *Ibsen: An Approach*, p. 24. Ibsen himself, apropos of his most intellectual drama, *Emperor and Galilean*, has observed: 'I look at the characters, at the conflicting designs, at history, and do not concern myself with the moral of it at all' (Cited, *ibid*, p. 25).

48. In this connections Vivian Mercier's remark is worth remembering: 'The great problem for the dramatist of ideas lies in the drama rather than in the ideas. If he cannot create interesting characters who embody in their own conflicts the conflicts of ideas or ideals, his work will satisfy neither actors nor audience' (*Ideas in the Drama*, p. 57).

49. *Ibsen's Dramatic Technique*, p. 14.

50. *The Playwright as Thinker*, p. 94.

51. Allardyce Nicoll, *World Drama*, pp. 545-46.

52. Eric Bentley, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

comes from one of his own characters. What Rubek says of the realism of his portrait busts applies equally to Ibsen's realistic plays:

Only I can see it—and how it makes me laugh! On the surface, there's the 'striking likeness', as they call it, that they all stand and gape with wonder at. (*Lowering his voice*) But deep down underneath, there's the pompous self-righteous face of a horse, the obstinate muzzle of a mule. . . . And it's these equivocal works of art that our worthy celebrities come and commission from me—and pay for in good faith. . . .⁵³

In fact, Ibsen's realism was greatly tempered by his use of romantic symbolism. As John Northam clearly demonstrates, 'much of the apparent realism in these plays is symbolic'.⁵⁴

The plays, as such, should be valued not for their realism or ideas (which are generally borrowed from contemporary thinkers like John Stuart Mill, Darwin, or Kierkegaard) but for the skill with which Ibsen creates an illusion of realism or transmutes 'the borrowed trappings of contemporary thought'⁵⁵ into an exciting dramatic experience.

Ibsen's dramatic art

When Ibsen started play-writing the ruling dramatist of the day was Augustine Eugene Scribe (1791–1861), the French dramatist, whose 'well-made' (*pièce bien faite*) or 'intrigue' plays had formed the staple fare at Bergen and Christiania theatres during his stay there. The main interest of these plays

53. *When We Dead Awaken*, Act I, in *Ghosts and Other Plays*, tr. Peter Watts (Penguin Books, 1977), p. 229.
54. *Ibsen's Dramatic Method*, p. 13. Eric Bentley, too, asserts that 'nearly every "naturalistic" play of Ibsen's contains a central symbol whose significance spreads over the whole play' (*op. cit.*, p. 98).
55. P. F. D. Tennant, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

lay in their plots which were skilfully constructed, and which kept the audience in a state of suspense and excitement till the very end. A number of tricks were used to serve this purpose—mistaken identity, misunderstandings, guilty secrets, lost letters, calculated exits and entrances, and so forth. Ibsen used almost all these expedients in his early plays and, though he gradually dispensed with them, he retained till the close of his dramatic career some of the basic techniques of the 'well-made' play. Like them, his plays are built around a secret, often a guilty one, which invests their action with dramatic suspense.

However, Ibsen's plays are fundamentally different from the 'well-made' drama of Scribe and his followers. Unlike the latter, which simply aimed at amusement and recreation,⁵⁶ his plays were intended to arouse and awaken the audience. They appeal to intellect rather than emotions, and lay their emphasis more on characterization than plot. As a well-known critic points out, they give 'the illusion of undistorted reality, enabling the playgoer to observe the characters and ponder the ideas and implications of a drama instead of watching the gyrations of the plot'.⁵⁷ In fact Ibsen raised the drama from the level of pure entertainment to that of an effective means of self-discovery and enlightenment. 'Hence forth', says John Gassner, 'a playwright was not to expect honour for merely cooking up a stew of a plot; and although many a practitioner had continued to acquire riches and a pretty reputation by no other means, a new standard of excellence was established'.⁵⁸

56. Speaking of these plays, Raymond Williams, in his *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, remarks: 'Drama, in fact, had been reduced to a mere theatrical excitement. Character and action, which in the best Elizabethan drama had been primarily conventions for the expression of a larger dramatic experience, had become absolute theatrical qualities' (p. 51).

57. John Gassner, *Master of the Drama*, p. 356.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 371.

A typical Ibsenian play is not so much an unravelling of plot as a revelation of character. Ibsen gradually reduces external action to such an extent that his last plays become almost static. As H. Granville-Barker suggests, his plays may be called 'a drama rather of being than doing'.⁵⁹ In their structure, they resemble Greek drama more than Shakespearean or 'well-made' plays. Like the Greek playwrights, Ibsen uses the retrospective method by which a situation is developed rather than a story told. His plays open just before the catastrophe, and the preceding events are recalled rather than represented on the stage. His skill lies in his manipulating the threads of his plot in such a way 'that each revelation of the past is linked (by cause or effect) to some turn in the revelation of character which forwards the immediate action of the play'.⁶⁰

Ibsen employed this method, for the first time, in his historical play, *The Vikings in Helgeland* (1858), but he dropped it afterwards. It is used again in *Pillars of Society*, which appeared in 1877. Henceforth, with the sole exception of *An Enemy of the People*, it becomes the most dominating technique of his plays. P. F. D. Tennant describes beautifully how Ibsen applies this method in a well-defined and set pattern:

He presents first of all an idyllic picture of a household living its everyday life. Then this little fenced-in world is suddenly broken into by a visitor from the world outside. He or she is an old friend of the family who has not been seen for several years. These meetings of old friends are the pivot of nearly all Ibsen's plays and they are followed up by a perfectly natural exchange of recollections and enquiries about the intervening period during which the friends have not seen one another. It is these

59. *On Dramatic Method*, p. 183.

60. H. Granville-Barker, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

enquiries which open up old wounds and bring about catastrophe.⁶¹

This description is, more or less, true of all of Ibsen's later plays.

Again, Ibsen, like the Greek dramatists, subscribes to the notions of 'unities' and Fate. Like them, he avoids sub-plots and restricts the number of characters to a bare minimum. All this proves to be of great advantage. As H. Granville-Barker observes, 'By simplifying the scheme of a play's visible action (its reminiscent action will be another matter), in its scenic setting, in the number of characters, in singleness of subject, he can make both its plan and atmosphere effective'.⁶²

Another feature of Ibsen's plays, towards which Bernard Shaw has drawn our attention,⁶³ is their realism or 'commonness'; his subjects, characters, situations, and settings—all are familiar to his audience. This was also the practice of the Greek playwrights who invariably drew on familiar myths and legends. Ibsen departs from them in so far as he chooses his subjects from the world around him. Here, too, he abstains from employing those characters and situations which are exceptional or uncommon. Instead of dwelling on the fortunes of a Hamlet or a King Lear, he prefers to deal with the problems of a Nora or a Mrs. Alving. His plays represent average humanity and its concerns. This is one of the reasons why they have got such a hold on their audiences; the latter read in them the stories of their own lives. As R. Ellis Roberts points out, Ibsen 'brought us all back . . . to the right view of dramatic life; he made his audiences part of his plays. We live in, not look at, a play by Ibsen'.⁶⁴

61. *Ibsen's Dramatic Technique*, p. 92.

62. Granville-Barker, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

63. See 'The Quintessence of Ibsenism', *Major Critical Essays*, p. 144.

64. *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Study*, p. 183.

There are also some technical factors which contribute to the apparent realism of his plays. They include detailed stage-directions, employment of everyday prose, and elimination of soliloquies and 'asides'. His stress on the visual concreteness of his settings and characters helps him greatly in making his plays look life-like.

As external action in his plays is gradually replaced by inner action, Ibsen comes to depend on dialogue for the success of his plays. 'Discussion', as Bernard Shaw says, becomes his chief weapon. '...it so overspreads and interpenetrates the action that it finally assimilates it, making the play and discussion practically identical'.⁶⁵ To serve this purpose, he uses 'rhetoric, irony, argument, paradox, epigram, parable, the arrangement of haphazard facts into orderly and intelligent situations'.⁶⁶

Ibsen's major problem, as H. Granville-Barker puts it, was 'to give an apparently commonplace form of speech all the dramatic force and, when need be, all the emotional suggestion that poetry could give'.⁶⁷ To a large extent, he succeeds in this mission. Eric Bentley demonstrates clearly how his ordinary-looking prose performs the functions of poetry:

An Ibsenite sentence performs four or five functions at once. It sheds light on the character speaking, on the character spoken to, on the character spoken about; it furthers the plot; it functions ironically in conveying to the audience a meaning different from that conveyed to the characters (and it is not merely that the characters say things which mean more to the audience than to them, but that they also say things which, as one senses, mean more to the characters than to the audience); finally, an Ibsenite sentence is part of the rhythmic

65. *Op. cit.*, p. 146.

66. Bernard Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

67. *Op. cit.*, p. 171.

pattern which constitutes the whole act. . . . It is as rich in artifice as the verse of *Peer Gynt*. Its very naturalness is the final artifice, the art that conceals the art.⁶⁸

Janko Lavrin, too, stresses 'Ibsen's capacity for conveying unspoken thought, together with its emotional and mental undercurrents'.⁶⁹ As he points out, Ibsen 'imparts to the dialogue itself a new dimension as it were—by deepening it into the parallel inner dialogue "between the lines", which often fills the simplest words and remarks with a second meaning'.⁷⁰ In fact, as we have observed earlier, there is always a substratum of poetry and symbolism in Ibsen's plays.

Ibsen's outstanding success as an artist lies in the way he invests his plays with telling realism without sacrificing any of the advantages that belong to a poetic dramatist like Aeschylus or Shakespeare.

Ibsen's contribution to drama

The days are gone when Ibsen's plays were a sensation both on and off the stage, but this should not be taken as a sign of his decline and fall. His immediate success was rather a *succès de scandale*, and was based, as M. C. Bradbrook suggests, on 'a very small proportion of his work',⁷¹ his so-called social dramas. It was his unorthodox treatment of social and moral problems of the day which first attracted his contemporaries, and created a kind of stir that we can hardly conceive today. Shaw's *Quintessence of Ibsenism*, written in 1891, records the contemporary impact of his plays, and shows clearly what he meant to the intellectuals of his age. To them, he was a revolutionary thinker, a social and moral philosopher of great

68. *The Playwright as Thinker*, p. 97.

69. *Ibsen: An Approach*, p. 27.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

71. *Ibsen the Norwegian*, p. 2.

significance. As Shaw put it, it was 'his message and the need of it'⁷² which drew them towards his plays, and which according to them, constituted their real strength.

Such a critical stand was but natural in an age which was seething with the spirit of revolution and change. But, now, most of the ideas around which Ibsen's social plays were built have lost their topical interest. They have either been assimilated into our social system or rejected as outdated. The plays, as such, have lost their sensational appeal. However, this loss has suitably been recompensed with a growing recognition of Ibsen's technical excellence. As J. W. McFarlane aptly observes, 'His normal stock has slumped, but this has been balanced by the appreciation in the value attached to his craftsmanship; he maintains his position, it seems, although no longer a leader of opinion but rather as a technician of the highest order'.⁷³ This is exactly the view-point of P. F. D. Tennant, the author of *Ibsen's Dramatic Technique* (1948). He demonstrates persuasively that Ibsen's 'ideas have not stood the test of time as well as the characters which enunciate them but the dramatic effect of his technique is as fresh as ever'.⁷⁴ According to him, 'It is Ibsen's dramatic form, not his ideas, which constitute his great contribution to the theatre'.⁷⁵

This view, which represents the post-Shavian approach, is certainly more satisfying than the earlier one that rested merely on Ibsen's ideas. Nevertheless, it fails to do full justice to Ibsen's achievement as a dramatist. For one thing, it ignores the fact that form alone does not make a play. It lays its stress entirely on the form to the utter neglect of the theme in the same manner as the earlier critics emphasized the theme at the

72. 'The Quintessence of Ibsenism' *Major Critical Essays*, p. 6.

73. *Ibsen and the Temper of Norwegian Literature*, p. 59.

74. *Ibsen's Dramatic Technique*, p. 15.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

cost of the form. In this respect, this view is no less extremist and lopsided than the earlier one. As J. W. McFarlane rightly points out, 'Ibsen has often found himself in post-Shavian criticism taken out of the company of Schopenhauer, Darwin and Nietzsche and associated rather with Scribe and Augier and Feuillet and Dumas *fils* and the tradition of the *pièce bien faite*'.⁷⁶ Of course, it was wrong to associate Ibsen with the thinkers and philosophers like Nietzsche but it is equally wrong to bring him down to the level of Scribe and his followers. Taken either just as a thinker or a craftsman, he occupies but an ordinary place.

In fact, his contribution to the drama is two-fold; it lies as much in the theme of his plays as in their form. Though it is necessary to reject the old idea of Ibsen as a great crusader, we should not forget that he made his plays the vehicles of significant themes. This is why his plays differ from those of Scribe and his school, though the latter were no less skilfully constructed. Even when he seems most concerned with transitory complexisites and pressures of 'modern' life, he is dealing convincingly with eternal and universal themes. As Storm Jameson remarks, 'His search for the truths of soul makes his thought timeless. It belongs to past present and future, as a search for the truth of social conditions cannot'.⁷⁷ However, he would not have become a great dramatist if he had not possessed the talent of an artist. He owes his success as much to his vision of truth as to his ability to give it an appropriate form. Or, if we use the word in its truly broad sense, we can say that Ibsen's triumph was the triumph of a really great artist. For, as R. Ellis Roberts says, 'It is precisely the artist who knows that the separation between Truth and Beauty is one of words, not of facts; that the schism lies not

76. *Op. cit.*, p. 59.

77. *Modern Drama in Europe*, p. 107.

in the nature of things, but in the crooked will of misinterpreting man.⁷⁸

Historically speaking, Ibsen's contribution to the field of drama has been exceptionally remarkable and far-reaching. He was both a pioneer and a trend-setter. With him, as George Steiner observes, 'the history of drama begins anew'.⁷⁹ However, the truth of these statements will not be clear unless they are read in conjunction with the following extract from another critic:

During a considerable part of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the contemporary acted drama in England and America was both intellectually and artistically stagnant. From, shall we say, the death of Sheridan to the emergence of Oscar Wilde, no Englishman and no American of considerable talent devoted himself chiefly to writing plays. The theatre, though it was sometimes commercially flourishing, was generally considered as nonliterary as intellectually dead as it was artistically null.⁸⁰

This is true not only of the drama of England and America but also of other countries, including France. It was Ibsen who restored it again to its earlier glory. In his hands, the drama becomes a serious art—a means of self-discovery and awakening rather than pure entertainment. As James Joyce said, his plays 'are so packed with thought. At some chance expression, the mind is tortured with some question, and in a flash long reaches of life are opened up in vista . . .'.⁸¹ In this respect, he has been followed by all later dramatists, from Bernard Shaw to Brecht and Sartre. Actually, what we call 'modern drama' dates from him. He established a new tradi-

78. *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Study*, p. 15.

79. *The Death of Tragedy*, p. 290.

80. Joseph Wood Krutch, 'Modernism' in *Modern Drama*, p. 3.

81. Cited, J. W. McFarlane, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

tion of dramatic writing which, in one form or another, still continues.

Intrinsically, Ibsen's plays are notable for their intellectual and artistic appeal. Instead of being dry exercises in moral persuasion (of which Shaw is sometimes guilty), they possess 'that quality of magic, of ecstasy which makes the supreme artist: he evokes souls by his art, and his evocation produces independent spirits who show us not the author's ideas but the idea of life, illustrate the purpose and meaning of humanity'.⁸² Ibsen's real talent lies in the skill with which he invests ordinary subjects with extraordinary meanings. As Allardyce Nicoll rightly notes, 'While outwardly Ibsen's scenes are "ordinary" and materialistically conceived, inwardly they are extraordinary and at times breathe the atmosphere of Peer Gynt's adventures in the hobgoblin's court'.⁸³ This is exactly what gives his work greatness and enduring interest. We may or may not agree with Luigi Pirandello who placed him next to Shakespeare,⁸⁴ but there is no doubt that he is one of the greatest dramatists the world has ever produced.

82. R. Ellis Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

83. *World Drama*, p. 546.

84. 'After Shakespeare I unhesitatingly place Ibsen first'. Cited, Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker*, p. 75.