Henrik Ibsen

Article abstract: Ibsen is one of the leading figures in modern drama. Moving beyond the melodramas of the nineteenth century, Ibsen created a drama of psychological realism. His dramas helped to create modern realistic theater.

Early Life

Henrik Ibsen was born on March 20, 1828, in Skien, Norway, the second child of Knud Ibsen, a well-to-do merchant, and his wife, Marchinen, née Altenburg. Ibsen’s house, which faced the town square, was across from a church and a town hall that housed lunatics in its cellar. Early in life, Ibsen was faced with what he would later see as the symbol of spiritual freedom (the church spire) countered by the forces of confinement (the town hall). When his father went bankrupt and the family was forced to move to a small farm, Ibsen felt the pressures of being socially ostracized. Also, rumors that he was illegitimate haunted the young Ibsen.

Theater was one of Ibsen’s outlets, and by the age of twelve Ibsen had seen six plays by Eugène Scribe and had read Friedrich Schiller. As a child, Ibsen amused himself by staging puppet shows, magic acts, and ventriloquist’s routines. In 1843, Ibsen went as an apothecary’s apprentice to Grimstad, where he fathered an illegitimate child by a servant girl. This event would account for the themes of guilt, fear, and burdensome responsibility attached to sexual relationships in his works. At Grimstad, Ibsen absorbed himself in the realism of Charles Dickens, the biting satire of Voltaire, the explosive dramas of William Shakespeare, and the Romantic tragedies of Schiller. Also, he began to develop his skill as a social critic by writing lampoons and satires. In addition, he wrote poetry which ranged from introspective meditations to political propaganda, and he published Catalina (1850; Catilina, 1921), his first play. It focused on one of his favorite themes: the conflict between the lone individual and the forces of power. That same year, Ibsen moved to Christiana to study medicine, but he paid more attention to his literary pursuits and never finished his degree. His play Kjempehøien (1850; Burial Mound, 1912) was produced by the Christiana Theater. Ibsen continued to sharpen his skill as a poet, ventured into political journalism, and wrote perceptive theatrical criticism. Active in leftist political movements, he barely escaped being arrested. From then on, Ibsen distanced himself from political activism.

In 1851, Ibsen became stage manager and playwright-in-residence at Ole Bull’s Norwegian Theater in Bergen. Having received a travel grant, he toured Denmark and Germany to learn the latest developments in theater. Overworked, underpaid, and unable to produce innovative works, Ibsen left Bergen to become the artistic director of the Norwegian Theater in Christiana. This job was no less frustrating, however, and Ibsen was eventually driven to bouts of depression and alcoholism. Given a small travel grant and aided by friends, Ibsen finally left Norway for Italy. He was to spend the better part of his career in exile from family and country.

During Ibsen’s career in Norwegian theater, he wrote nationalistic sagas and satirical comedies. His experience as a director taught him how to structure his dramas and how to make effective use of visual and poetic imagery. Although the dramas of this early period are full of bombast and mechanical contrivances, Ibsen was starting to formulate a new kind of drama.
Life’s Work

Ibsen’s career as a major world dramatist began in Rome. Exiled from a Norway whose narrow provincialism had stifled him, and infuriated over his country’s refusal to aid Denmark, Ibsen created Brand (1866; English translation, 1891), a monumental poetic drama delving into the spiritual crisis of a romantic idealist. Ibsen had now gone beyond the aestheticism of his earlier nationalistic sagas to write a profound drama which would rouse his countrymen from their complacency and force them to face the great issues of life. Widely discussed and hotly debated, Brand became a best-seller and won for Ibsen a pension from his government. Ibsen countered Brand with another massive poetic drama, Peer Gynt (1867; English translation, 1892), the story of an opportunistic double-dealer who compromises his inner self to achieve material gains. These two dramas established Ibsen’s reputation.

In 1868, Ibsen moved to Dresden. He was lionized by the king of Sweden and later represented Norway at the opening of the Suez Canal. By 1869, Ibsen started to move in the direction of modern realistic drama. De unge forbund (1869; The League of Youth, 1890) focused on a contemporary setting, employed colloquial speech patterns, and satirized political chicanery. In Kejser og Galileer (1873; Emperor and Galilean, 1876), Ibsen created an epic tragedy in prose. In this drama, Ibsen tried to reconcile the Christian call for self-sacrifice with the pagan command to enjoy the pleasures of life to the fullest, thereby exposing the underlying dilemma of the late nineteenth century.

Ibsen now began to dissociate himself from political reform movements in favor of a spiritual revolution based on a radical individualism bordering on anarchy. Influenced by the Danish critic George Brandes and the realist director George II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, Ibsen shifted away from historical plays and poetic epics to concentrate on prose dramas set in contemporary Norway. Eventually, he also helped to give form and depth to the modern realistic problem play. In Et dukkehjem (1879; A Doll’s House, 1880) and Gengangere (1881; Ghosts, 1885), Ibsen helped to shape the path of modern drama. Both plays treat contemporary issues, center on a small ensemble of characters, and take place in confined settings. They are crafted around tightly constructed plots which are based on the careful unraveling of past events. Their terse, choppy dialogue is loaded with double meanings, their decor is reflective of the moods and shifts of the characters, and their conflicts are intensely psychological. Both plays deal with women who are asked to sacrifice their duty to themselves in order to meet social obligations. Nora in A Doll’s House leaves her husband and children, whereas Mrs. Alving in Ghosts settles for a loveless marriage, wreaking destruction on her entire family.

In these two dramas, Ibsen exploded both the form and content of the contrived, sentimental, and moralistic melodramas of his time and considered such taboo subjects as venereal disease, incest, and mercy killing. Ibsen even attacked the cherished institution of marriage. On the legitimate stage, his plays were banned or rewritten, but in the new avant-garde theaters of Europe, Ibsen’s works became staples of the new repertory. Ibsen created plays that attacked bourgeois values at the same time as he elevated domestic drama to the status of high tragedy.

Soon Ibsen would go beyond social drama to probe the recesses of the unconscious in such plays as Rosmersholm (1886; English translation, 1889). Ibsen now began to show that an individual’s repressed drives can bring about his or her destruction. In Hedda Gabler (1890; English translation, 1891), Ibsen combined realistic techniques with psychological drama. He dropped the standard exposition, eliminated long monologues, and created broken dialogue infused with underlying meanings. Hedda is a middle-class woman with no purpose in life. She tries to release her pent-up drives by controlling the destinies of the men around her. Failing in this, she shoots herself in the head.
After wandering back and forth between Italy and Germany, Ibsen returned to Norway a national hero. He was given the Grand Cross in Denmark, honored by royalty, and celebrated in torchlight parades. Frightened and fascinated by the new generation, Ibsen passed through a series of platonic affairs with young girls such as Émile Bardach, Helene Raff, and Hildur Andersen. The theme of a young girl beckoning an aging architect to create a masterpiece appears in the first of his final plays, *Bygrometer Solness* (1892; *The Master Builder*, 1893). In these plays, Ibsen experiments with a form of mystic and visionary drama. Ibsen now focuses on the artist and his relationship to art. These short, narrowly focused dramas have a somber, poetic quality laden with symbolic overtones. Their claustrophobic, intense, and anxious mood of finality foreshadows the techniques of the modernist dramas of the twentieth century.

In 1901, Ibsen suffered the first of a series of strokes, which would eventually lead to his death on May 23, 1906. His last words were “On the contrary!”—an appropriate exit line for a man who celebrated the individual’s right to define himself contrary to both the wishes of the establishment and the pressures of the crowd.

**Summary**

Henrik Ibsen was one of the first playwrights to create tragic dramas about ordinary people caught in the webs of fate and forced to choose between their self-fulfillment and their responsibility to others. Ibsen helped to create the modern psychological drama which probes the recesses of the unconscious. His scenic details, suggestive imagery, poetic symbols, and double-edged dialogue created a dramatic technique that would help to revolutionize the modern theater. His dramas depended on a subtle, truthful form of acting which inspired ensemble productions free from rhetoric, bombast, and posturing. Ibsen’s plays challenged avant-garde directors such as André Antoine, Otto Brahm, and Konstantin Stanislavsky. Ibsen also influenced a diverse group of dramatists. George Bernard Shaw saw him as the champion of the propaganda drama. Arthur Miller centered on Ibsen’s social dramas, whereas Luigi Pirandello and Harold Pinter focused on Ibsen’s existential pieces.

Ibsen defies classification. He sought to go beyond photographic realism, yet he shunned symbolism. He attacked the hypocrisy of social and political establishments but refused to attach himself to any liberal reform movements. He probed deeply into the problems of women but dissociated himself from feminist causes. Ibsen, the true existentialist, had his characters ask two questions which would become the focal questions of modern drama: Who am I? and How can I be true to myself?
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