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### Ibsen: Motivation, Method, and Influence

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IBSEN: MOTIVATION, METHOD, AND INFLUENCE



A Special Studies  
Presented to  
Mr. Dennis Holt  
Ouachita Baptist University



*12/16/70*

*D. Holt*

In Fulfillment  
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Honors Special Studies 491



by  
Vicki Hubbs  
December 1970

# IBSEN: MOTIVATION, METHOD, AND INFLUENCE

## Introduction

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Although the Norwegian Dramatist Henrik Ibsen is a century removed from the happenings of the present day, the themes with which he dealt within his plays are relevant to today's situations. This "father of modern drama" might possibly be called "the originator of the women's liberation movement" with the revolutionary ideas he presented to the 19th century in his play A Doll's House. Ibsen was even aware of the generation gap - a fact that is evident in his plays dealing with relations between parents and children.

Arthur Miller summed up the source of Ibsen's success in the following quote:

There is one quality in Ibsen that no serious writer can afford to overlook. It lies at the very center of his force, and I found in it - as I hope others will - a profound source of strength. It is his insistence, his utter conviction, that he is going to say what he has to say, and that the audience, by God, is going to listen. It is the very same quality that makes a star actor, a great public speaker and a lunatic. Every Ibsen play begins with the unwritten words: 'Now listen here!'"<sup>1</sup>

The works of Ibsen, the master of discussion,<sup>2</sup> fall neatly into three distinct periods which will be discussed within this paper. Ibsen, as a chief example of the modern drama of ideas,<sup>3</sup> had a marked influence on the modern trends in play writing when he dared to break with centuries old play writing traditions.

To be able to understand the methods and motivation of Ibsen one must be familiar with his background.

Ibsen was born in Skien, Norway, on March 20, 1828. He was a shy child who became even more withdrawn after his

father experienced bankruptcy. He played indoors, and was interested in books. His first experience with the theater occurred when he created a crude form of doll theater. His only involvement with other children centered around this theater.

Since Ibsen's family wasn't able to provide more than the necessities in regard to education, he was apprenticed to an apothecary in Grimstad when he was sixteen. It was here that he became more involved in a social life. During these years he formulated his feelings of revolt against the narrow bourgeois spirit of the town. Here he found expression in his first poems and sketches.<sup>4</sup>

In 1850 Ibsen went to Christiania University to receive an education for a possible literary career. Although He never actually met the requirements for entrance into the University, he participated in student life and wrote for student publications.

Ibsen found relief from a life of constant disappointments when he received his first successes with the publications of Brand and Peer Gynt. After his successes Ibsen developed a feeling of self-confidence and adopted a pseudo-personality.<sup>5</sup> Since he began to feel indispensable to the world at large, he took very good care of himself. He made sure that he got plenty of rest, was under no strain, and was thoroughly protected against colds and injuries that might prevent him from fulfilling the mission he had begun.<sup>6</sup>

Ibsen left Norway before he finished writing Brand. After he arrived in Munich he began to live a highly systematized and organized life. He arranged his life and habits on a regular timetable. His daily schedule was planned with few variations. Ibsen even systematized his creativity by producing a play every two years with only two minor variations.<sup>7</sup>

Ibsen's plays are of three types - the first of which is the poetical drama. As a representative of this type I read Peer Gynt which was published in 1867.

In the fantasy Peer Gynt, which resembles an epic poem, Ibsen's satire is aimed at the weaknesses of society and human nature. The character Peer Gynt symbolizes mankind in general. Within the play he has many positions and takes many forms. As Thomas H. Dickinson said, "He is an adventurer, a charlatan, a good-natured fellow, a man of imagination, a snob, and a pathetic figure."<sup>8</sup>

Peer Gynt's most admirable characteristic is his sincerity, a characteristic shared by his girlfriend Solveig. He is a dreamer and therefore is always searching. These qualities were confusing to the devil who was unable to deal with Peer Gynt within the play.

Ibsen did not intend for Peer Gynt to be presented on stage because of its complexity and poetical form. Peer Gynt differs greatly from Ibsen's later plays.

The fantasy, as written in poetry, would be too

difficult for children to follow and yet, Adults would probably lack the imagination to connect the unreality with its intended satire.

The most valuable aspect of Peer Gynt is the motto he adopted: "Be thyself."

"Ibsen was constantly concerned with ethical problems and was usually ready to state or imply an ethical judgement."<sup>9</sup> Ibsen's middle period, which dealt with social problems, was his most influential. He focused narrowly in each on one particular social problem. Each of the plays of this period also deals with the general problems surrounding the relation between the individual and society. He was in favor of the right of the individual over social traditions which he felt were old fashioned.<sup>10</sup> The vitality and liveliness of Ibsen's plays dealing with social problems prevented them from becoming simply pamphlets written for a cause.<sup>11</sup>

An Enemy of the People, published in 1882 is an example of one of Ibsen's social problem plays. Although Dr. Stockman, the protagonist of the play, represents one of Ibsen's best efforts at characterization, the play is definitely not Ibsen's best.

The play dealt with a conflict between one resident of the town and the rest of the people. In the situation one man was definitely in the right but the whole town opposed him because his ideas would have been harmful to their positions and to the economy of the town as a whole.

The Enemy of the People was an attack by Ibsen on democracy and on the tyranny of the majority.

The play is almost comic in places. The intensity of the situation is overwhelming in spots. Ibsen's satire in this play is broad and the plot is vigorous.

The best element of An Enemy of the People besides the excellent humorous characterization of Stockman is its theme. Essentially the play says "the strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone."<sup>12</sup>

After success with the play Romersholt, Ibsen continued to write character studies which concentrated on the hidden mysteries of human consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

Hedda Gabler "is primarily the exposition of the character of a woman out of harmony with her surroundings. All the skill of the dramatist brought to bear upon a complete revelation of her past life, her thoughts, and her acts."<sup>14</sup>

Hedda Gabler is a young married woman who is totally dissatisfied with her situation in life. She is bored by her husband and her environment. She reacts negatively to every aspect of life. Her manner is hateful and sullen. "Hedda has no principles; She is empty and limited just as she considers her environment to be. Her reaction to life is negative."<sup>15</sup>

The entire play focuses around Hedda. The characters emphasize Hedda's personality. That the play is extremely well-written is evident as the story unfolds surrounding the



central situation.

Hedda is futilely searching for fulfillment as did Peer Gynt. She is unable to grow spiritually or to sustain any meaningful relationships.

The fate that is usually dominant in Ibsen's tragedies creates catastrophe in the form of death - usually suicide as in Hedda Gabler's case.<sup>16</sup> Hedda's suicide is a form of liberation. Hedda was as empty and limited as she felt her surroundings were.

Hedda Gabler is a tragedy with great impact caused by Hedda's suicide and intensified by the deaths of other characters in the climax.

Ibsen's plays primarily centered around family and private relationships. Themes that he used were heredity, individual emancipation, incest, illegitimacy, family problems, problems in marriage, and relations between parents and children.

Ibsen had a remarkable capacity for vision.<sup>18</sup> Since he was so involved with his characters they became very close and were dear to him. This intimacy was promoted by the fact that he often used people he knew as models for his characters.

Ibsen was not always given credit for his genius as he is now. He was too radical for the 19th century but some consider him too conservative for the 20th.

He has unofficially been dubbed the "Father of Modern Drama" - a title that no earlier dramatist was worthy of.

When his methods and ideas began to be understood, things opened up for him and serious dramatists all over Europe began to imitate him. Even Strindberg, who was the most violent and consistent of Ibsen's first opponents, was influenced by Ibsen's Brand. They recognized his skill as he taught them to put obvious thoughts into sound plays. He saw the need of using everyday prose as the proper form of dialogue.

Ibsen's contributions to the drama were great and his impact was lasting. He deeply believed that certain truths should guide men and women in their conduct. He wrote primarily for the intellectual.

Ibsen's twenty-eight plays cover a writing career of fifty years. He was a hard working dramatist who never allowed the criticisms of his colleagues to interrupt his creativity. As Dr. Stockman of An Enemy of the People said, "the strong stand alone."<sup>19</sup> Ibsen was strong enough to stand alone in the break from old play writing traditions and to set the stage for a modern drama of ideas.

ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Henrik Ibsen, An Enemy of the People (New York: The Viking Press, 1951), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>3</sup>Frank Chandler, Aspects of Modern Drama (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1914), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup>Barrett H. Clark, A History of Modern Drama (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc., 1947), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>P. F. D. Tennant, Ibsen's Dramatic Technique (New York: Humanities Press, 1965), p. 21.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>8</sup>Thomas H. Dickinson, An Outline of Contemporary Drama (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1927), p. 73.

<sup>9</sup>Barrett H. Clark, A Study of the Modern Drama (New York: D-Appleton Century Company, 1938), p. 9.

<sup>10</sup>Dickinson, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>11</sup>Clark, A History of Modern Drama, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>14</sup>Clark, A Study of the Modern Drama, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup>Clark, A History of the Modern Drama, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup>Tennant, op. cit., p. 118.

<sup>17</sup>Clark, A History of the Modern Drama, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup>Tennant, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>19</sup>John Gassner, Four Great Plays by Henrik Ibsen (New York: Bantam Company, 1959), p. xiii.