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## Henrick Ibsen's *Ghosts*: Ideals and Victims

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### Abstract:

Henrick Ibsen's play *Ghosts* deals with themes like children out of marriage, incest, mercy killing, sexually transmitted disease, profligacy etc. But the protagonist of the play Mrs. Alving is dutiful to her husband and her family, and sincere to the established conventions. But her ideal of being sincere to conventional morality causes her a great tragedy Her life with her libertine husband has been miserable. Her son Oswald, who she sees to be her only solace, inherits syphilis. She can neither bring about a marriage between her son and the servant maid nor can comfort her dying son. She believes that her servant maid can be a nurse and comforter to her son Oswald but she leaves him unattended. Mrs. Alving witnesses his ailing son progressing towards death, suffering a mortal agony. Ibsen tries to show that Mrs Alving's adherence to moral and conventional values is the tragic flaw. Had she not remained with Captain Alving, she would not have suffered the tragedy of struggling with an immoral husband, and would not have begotten Oswald and suffered as a witness of her own son's agony and death. She cling to the ideals, she brought about a tragedy.

**Keywords: Ideals, Tragic flaw, tragedy, inheritance, profligacy, iconoclast, marriage,**

Henrick Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright, was a realist, rationalist and an iconoclast who took drama to a higher level. Lyons calls him "the realist, iconoclast, the successful or failed idealist, the poet, the psychologist, the romantic and the antiromantic." (Suleiman, 2011:5). When dramas were meant for entertaining the audience, he was the one to infuse it with a new spirit of 'ideas', with which he shocked his contemporary bourgeois society exposing its rottenness. According to him, the cause of all social maladies is blind adherence to the so called conventional values. He challenged such values and formulated the basic rights and liberties of the individual. He was the first one to express views and offer suggestions for the liberation of women from the mortal grip of conventions - religious, societal, political, familial - framed by men.

Ibsen's *Ghosts* is a realistic play that deals with moral aberration, infidelity, children out of marriage, syphilis, incest, debauchery, euthanasia, dementia etc. Gosse says, "Conventional readers were shocked by the theme, and the drastic treatment of the theme; artistic readers could not reconcile themselves to such an outrage upon dramatic tradition." (Egan, 231) So the play had been considered as one that could corrupt normalcy. The play deals with ideals, moral responsibility, and sincerity towards conventional values as well. But Ibsen does not advocate adhering to conventional values blindly. Blind adherence to such ideals cannot sustain happiness but will breed misery. He condemns those ideals because it was those conventions that kill conjugal felicity and mar matrimony.

According to Ibsen, marriage must be based on a 'spiritual communion' and not on material need. *Ghosts* is a tragedy – tragedy due to Mrs. Alving's Hamartia - sincerity to conventional ideals. Ideals are ideals when it cherishes happiness. But ideals are tragic flaws

when it victimises the idealists, and brings about a tragedy. Here Mrs. Alving, Captain Alving's widow is the victim as well as the victimizer.

Mrs. Helena Alving is the widow of the chamberlain and sailor Captain Alving. She lives a life of sham and deception, hiding the truth of her husband's profligacy and his suffering from syphilis. When Mrs. Alving comes to know the debauchery of her husband at the prime of their marriage, she flees from him and seeks refuge of Pastor Manders. Mrs. Helena Alving, bred well to live a moral life, was unable to cope up with the dissolute Alving and his philandering. So, it is natural for a woman like Helena to hate men like her husband. But she is gravitated towards the pious and austere Pastor Manders. She falls in love with Manders. She runs away to Manders whom she loves and who loves her. But he sends her back home moralizing that it is the duty of a wife to remain with her husband.

Persuaded by the very words of Manders, she returned to her husband, thinking that bearing a child will make the inconstant sailor a responsible husband. When Oswald is born, Captain Alving begins his amorous flirtations with the servant-maid Johanna. Helena is terrified that her little boy would see what his father is. She sends her son Oswald to school. The liaison between Alving and Johanna brings forth a daughter, Regina. Then Johanna is married to Engstrand, a carpenter, when Regina is still in the womb. Engstrand is provided with a great sum to marry Johanna, the fallen woman. He maintains himself as the father to Regina. To prevent her son Oswald Alving picking up the qualities of his father, she sends him to Paris to bring him up a gentleman and to learn painting, and grows up Regina, as her maid, not disclosing her father's identity.

Mrs. Alving abides by pastor says: "We have simply to do our duty, Mrs. Alving! And your duty was to hold firmly to the man you had once chosen, and to whom you were bound by the holiest ties. ....But a wife is not appointed to be her husband's judge. It was your duty to bear with humility the cross which a Higher Power had, in its wisdom, laid upon you." Mrs. Alving was a dutiful wife. Even though she was not able to cope up with his amorous intentions, she abides by his needs. She confesses Pastor Manders:

That has been my ceaseless struggle, day after day. After Oswald's birth, I thought Alving seemed to be a little better. But it did not last long. And then I had to struggle twice as hard, fighting as though for life or death, so that nobody should know what sort of man my child's father was. And you know what power Alving had of winning people's hearts. Nobody seemed able to believe anything but good of him. (65)

David Kelly says, "The horror of Mrs. Alving's life is that she had to lock herself up in the house in the country, giving into the captain's secret orgies and preserving his bogus reputation."(Thomason:87) Thus she hides the truth about her husband's profligacy and maintains her family's reputation; hushes up the scandal between her husband and the pregnant Johanna, and arranges a marriage with Engstrand offering a huge sum; raises her husband's illegitimate daughter in her house not revealing her real origin; builds an orphanage for children as expiation for her husband's sins.

Being a dutiful mother she does not want her son to simulate his father. That is why she sends her son Oswald to Paris. Long after, when he comes home for the opening the memorial orphanage, she learns that he suffers from a strange disease. She goes to the extent of arranging a relationship between Regina and her son Oswald, finding the relationship between them. When her conventions restrict an incestuous marriage, she reveals to them that they are siblings.

Bound in marriage by a "sacred bond" her duty was "to adhere to the man she had chosen;" though a husband be profligate, a wife's duty is to bear the cross laid upon her shoulders by "a higher will,". Ibsen was accused of being an enemy to the "sacred ties of marriage." People could not understand that he believed it must be based on spiritual communion – mere "living together" was not enough. He felt that a man and a woman should, ideally, go through life together as perfect equals, in perfect honesty, free to develop – each in his own way into a complete human entity. (Le Gallienne: 1981, xiv-v)

*Ghosts* was a logical sequel to *A Doll's House*, and when *Ghosts* was published two years later in 1881, Ibsen was denounced as architect of the greatest scandal of modern times. Robert W. Corrigan while interpreting the play says:

First, Ibsen wrote *Ghosts* as an answer to the objections raised by Nora's flight from her husband and children in *A Doll's House*. Tied to a worse husband than Helmar, Mrs. Alving, instead of leaving him, had decided to stay, and to cover up the "corpse" of her married life with respectable trappings. Second: Mrs. Alving and Oswald are the victims of a two-fisted fate which takes the form of the laws of heredity in a mechanistic world and the stultifying and debilitating conventions of respectability.

*A Doll's House* projects that a woman should be independent and strong. *Ghosts* projects what would happen to a woman if she is submissive to marital ideals through Mrs. Alving. "A woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view." (Ibsen: 1978, 91) Women suffer more than men under these circumstances, but they carry a vision about freedom and another kind of life. According to Ibsen's moral ideals, women should be strong and independent enough to stand up to an oppressive and patriarchal society; Nora, in *A Doll's House*, abandons not only her husband, but her entire family, in an effort to discover herself and become a liberated woman. Mrs. Alving inability to shirk ideals draws her into the pitfalls of tragedy.

The person who wars with ghosts is Mrs Alving herself. According to Ibsen Mrs. Alving is the woman who has the tragic flaw. The tragic flaw is her ideals called, moral continence. A great number of "ghosts" haunt Mrs. Alving. Neither the disease nor his transgressions destroy Alving's family, but Mrs. Alving's ideals. She was misled to believe that she should desire Captain Alving's wealth and position. She did not have the courage to flee the "old dead doctrine" that was her marriage or to resist that marriage. Ibsen presents Oswald's syphilis as the result, not of Captain Alving's transgressions, but of Mrs. Alving's obedience. If she had left the marriage, she would never have borne Oswald or exposed him to his father's affliction.

The particular social and ethical processes concerning Ibsen here are the problem of devotion to outdated standards of behaviour called ghosts what Shaw calls 'slavery to the ideals of goodness'. "Old dead doctrines and opinions and beliefs" cannot necessarily be seen, but the corporeal scourges they result in are all too evident. It is in trying to live up to outmoded ideals – what a wife should be, what a mother should be" (Shaw 147) – that Mrs. Alving has doomed her son.

Toril Moi describes Ibsen as "idealism's greatest critic" and *Ghosts* as "his most intensely idealistic play" (Moi 319). Contrary to contemporary attitudes, Ibsen's attack on marriage is not entirely uncompromising. Oswald has acquired syphilis, not because his

mother remained in a ruinous marriage, but because he carried the qualities of his father. Ibsen's does not forbid ideals in entirety.

*Ghosts* reveals that the world must be cured of its devotion to repressive codes. Shaw argues *Ghosts* launches an "uncompromising and outspoken attack on marriage as a useless sacrifice of human beings to an ideal" (Shaw 86). It is a realistic play with symbolic elements. Ibsen insists upon a revision of old traditions, dead beliefs, and superstitions that dominate every society. He removes his disguise to present his iconoclastic view that blind adherence to outmoded ideals will make life miserable. Ibsen calls those ideals as 'ghosts' which cause an inevitable influence, but they must be kept under control to live life sensibly.

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