



Environment and Heredity in Ibsen's Ghosts

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Abstract

This paper explores the Naturalistic nature of Ibsen's Ghosts. Naturalism views human life in relation to internal and external environment (Zola, 1968). It insists on the effect of the past that shapes the present life. Ghosts is a typical naturalistic play that deals with the life of individuals in relation their environment. (Shaw, 1891). The nineteenth century theorist Emile Zola first developed and applied this movement in his novels. Henrik Ibsen brought this tradition to his social plays. Life is depicted objectively in order to capture the real world. Ibsen abandons verse for prose to expose human reality in scientific manner. Issues like heredity, incest, venereal diseases, frustration, unhappy social relationship and marital problems, all spring out from the overwhelming influence of Environment and Heredity.

Keywords: kanthapura, nation, nationalism

Introduction

Naturalism assumes that human beings' impulse, action and language are determined by heredity, environment and uncontrollable past events (Williams, 1994) Naturalistic writers describe or expose uncomfortable truths about society which are beyond the control of human beings. Naturalistic Theatre presents real life problems on the picture frame stage. The audience is allowed to eavesdrop on the going on inside the living room through the missing fourth wall. Ghosts is a typical naturalistic play. It conforms to this tradition. The action unfolds in a large garden room. Skeletons come spilling out of cupboard within the four wall off the Alving Heritage. Mrs Helene Alving's personality is governed by social, spiritual forces and power of the past. Likewise, her son, Oswald's life is dominated by biological determinism.

Mrs Alving

Henrik Ibsen's Ghosts documents a woman's attempt to emerge out of the complex web of patriarchal social morality and religious dogma. Mrs Helene Alving is convinced to marry the wayward Captain Alving, 'a good catch.' Misused as a daughter, she is next abused as a wife. The play traces her journey from this state to a level of maturity full of mental strength and individual determination.

Helene's transformation to Mrs Alving initiates her days of misery. Captain Alving's appetite for enjoyment contrasts with Helene's moral upbringing. She finds it unutterably miserable to live with Captain Alving's debauchery and profligacy. Helene blames herself for not bringing in enough joy in her husband's life. But this stage in Mrs Alving's life ends with her first step towards breaking through her religious indoctrination. She leaves her husband a year after her marriages and takes refuge with her former love Pastor Manders. At this point Mrs Helene Alving's personality draws comparison to that of Nora Helmer in A Doll's House (Nagpal, 2015) [2].

The next stage in Helene's emancipation starts with her 'prodigal' return. Pastor Manders refreshes her memory of the patriarchal society's norms for a wife. She is reminded of the sacred bond between husband and wife. Although faith in duty, marriage, religion, family becomes weaker in Mrs Alving, she tries to reformulate her ideas of duty within marriage. In doing so she tries to blend with Captain Alving's way of life. She keeps her drunken husband out of public view. Mrs Alving gathers more strength as a human being.

Mrs Alving goes one important step further to create a personal and independent identity free from patriarchal and religious dogmas. Her discovery of Captain Alving-Joanna affair initiates this stage. She manages to decondition her mind filled with religious dogma and sense of duty. She usurps the corrupt husband's authority over the family, manages her household maid Joanna, takes the responsibility of the illegitimate child Regina, sends her son away to shield him from the home's decadent atmosphere. She reads books that enlighten her about the condition of women. New ideas bring a flash of modernity into her dull world of duty and religion. She is now able to assess her own past life and her relationship with Captain Alving and Pastor Manders. She puts up a tough stance in front of the Pastor while discussing Oswald-Regina relationship. But still Mrs Alving does not have the full strength to implement her newly found ideas. Consequently she identifies this as 'cowardice' within her.

However, the reality of Oswald's illness transforms Mrs Helene Alving into a mature and bold woman. She reveals the truth about the father to the son, about Regina's status in the family to both Oswald and Regina, the

truth behind her decision to set up the Memorial, and her desire to detach her family from the 'ghost' of Captain Alving. Her failure in this attempt and her final tragedy portrays the imprisonment of a strong woman within the Naturalist and Darwinian world.

Mrs Helene Alving has inherited the religious and convention nature of her parents. Although she is emotionally attached to Pastor Manders, she accepts her mother's and two aunts' economic explanation to marry Captain Alving. She performs wifely duty to her husband as society expects from a woman. But life becomes miserable for her due to the hedonistic life style of her husband. When the agony becomes unbearable, she seeks Pastor Manders' refuge. But Pastor Manders promptly sends Mrs Alving back to the path of duty and obedience to husband and family life. But the tumultuous situation of her life compels Mrs Alving to see through the hypocrisy of religious and social morality. She designs ways of living on with a fallen man, to cover up the 'corpse' of her married life with respectable trappings. She manages her housemaid Joanna with whom Mr Alving has a love child. She takes the responsibility of the illegitimate daughter Regina. She sends Oswald to Paris to save him from contaminated and immoral life. She tries to rid herself of religious and social conventions. Her choice of books reveals it. She decides to establish an orphanage in memory of Late Captain Alving to settle the account of money-centered marriage. She invests all the money on it so that what Oswald would inherit 'shall come from me and on one else.' Social and economic condition moulds Mrs Helene's life and she wants to 'release the past' from Oswald's life with rigorous planning. This makes *Ghosts* a naturalistic play.

The Title

No real apparition appears on the stage of this play. Ibsen regards the stringent and stereotypical European social customs and conventions as ghosts. These ghosts are patriarchal norms that encourage deceit rather than truth. They dominate and ruin several generations of lives. Hereditary influence of the father over the son also operates as ghosts in the play.

The title gets echoed in the text in Mrs Helene Alving's speech towards the end of Act I: "Ghosts, Those two from the greenhouse have come back." In Act II, Mrs Alving gives her famous 'ghost' speech to Manders. She refers to Oswald as a 'ghost-son', a replica of the dead father (Ibsen, 1970). Oswald's moral degeneration echoes his father Captain Alving's licentiousness. He flirts with Regina as his father did with Joanna. Oswald has also inherited his father's love of enjoyment. Upon his return from Paris, Oswald displays signs of boredom which Mrs Alving earlier noticed in the father. He smokes the father's cigar, sits after dinner killing time over a bottle of wine. Even Regina has inherited some traits of her mother. Parental or ancestral control of the self becomes ghosts for Mrs Alving or Ibsen.

Mrs Alving's speech in Act II highlights even a larger dimension of enslavement of the self. The standard of social mores, conventional morality and tradition become ghosts for her. These age old restrictive forces make her lead a miserable life. She has to tolerate the debauchery of Captain Alving. She remains faithful to her dissolute husband. The ideal of wifely and womanly duty make her hide her husband's illicit relationship with the housemaid Joanna. She conceals everything from the world. When she once falters, she is led back to the path of duty by Pastor Manders. He tutors Mrs Alving on Christian ideals of marriage, about the sacred bond between husband and wife. Ibsen's title captures these ghosts that plague the lives of people, Specially women.

Regina is constantly forced to surrender her own desires to give in to the ghost of duty. Jacob Engstrand and Pastor Manders want Regina to leave the Alving household to perform her duty to her father. This means that she would be the chief lady of a sailor's home, which is a euphemism for the brothel. Ironically filial duty is forced to even lead one to the physical humiliation.

Oswald's hereditary infection of Syphilis reveals how the ghost of Captain Alving has still strong grip over the house. The disease has remained dormant in Oswald's body for many years. This shatters Mrs Alving with that 'Everything my son inherits will come from me.' Although Mrs Alving has of late started reading some progressive books, she chooses to remain subservient to the ghosts of the plot. In this sense, Ibsen's title highlights total annihilation of individual freedom and choice by defunct patriarchal tradition.

The impossibility to release the past and avoid hereditary influence dawns on Mrs Alving very soon. Oswald's appearance and his presence at Rosenvold reveal this naturalistic heritage. Like Mr Alving, Oswald feels boredom, he likes lying on bed, smoking and drinking. Even Pastor Manders recognizes the father in him when Oswald smokes the father's pipe. Oswald flirts with the housemaid as Mr Alving did the same with Joanna. Ibsen incorporates naturalistic principles in all these traits of Oswald.

Oswald's hereditary disease of Syphilis is yet another aspect that makes *Ghosts* a naturalistic play. Metaphorically this disease parallels the larger social illness of conventional morality which generations inherit from the past. Thus as a naturalistic play Ibsen's *Ghosts* reveals that individual lives are governed by overarching pressure of heredity and environment.

Conclusion

Ibsen's *Ghosts* brought the biggest stir in Europe (Johnston, 2004) ^[1]. The play attacks the contemporary values of middle-class, particularly the institution of marriage, law and order, and filial and societal duty. Oswald's hereditary disease symbolically and metaphorically refers to the disease that society itself passes on to the next generation. Thus Ibsen's critique of contemporary ideals permeates the plot of *Ghosts*.

References

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